

INFERNO!

TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE

£5.00 UK
\$6.95 US
\$10.00 CAN



Issue 5

INFERNO!™

HERE WE ARE at issue five of *Inferno!* Do you know, that makes us almost a year old. Phew! That means that there will be those of you have been with us through every gun-toting, chainsaw-wielding story. On the other hand, there may still be some of you who are slower on the uptake (come on, where have you *been?*), who might have just picked *Inferno!* up for the first time.

For all you newbies, a big hello! Just to set the scene for you, *Inferno!* is all about action-packed short stories set in the grim worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000, which are the background settings for Games Workshop's tabletop fantasy wargames. So read on, you are in for a treat. We've been especially busy at the Black Library over the last few months, working on our *top secret* Project X.

For those regulars, thanks greatly. Your patronage means we can pay the gas bill, and have some cash left over for a beer and a curry! This issue, you will see that we have a splendid cover painting from Mark Gibbons, his debut cover for *Inferno!* What a corker! Next, you might spot that there are just three pages of comic strip in these hallowed pages – the next frenzied instalment of 'Obvious Tactics' from David Pugh: there simply wasn't any room for any more comic art! What we have this issue are four really meaty stories in this issue, including two from newly discovered writers (talk about grim, James!). And when it comes right down to it, that is what *Inferno!* is all about: gripping adventure stories from the worlds of Warhammer.

'Yes, yes, but what's this big secret' I hear you mutter. 'What *is* Project X?' Well, after waiting for over a decade, the stars and planets are now in alignment, the Imperial Tarot shows all the right auspices and even



Old Mother Wigmore says we are in for a good year, so we are finally going to do it! March sees the launch of *Warhammer Monthly*, a 36-page monthly comic!

Now, don't get the wrong idea: this does not mean that you will never see comic strips in *Inferno!* ever again. Far from it. Even as I write, I can see the *Inferno!* mindslaves in desperate combat with the newly arrived *Warhammer Monthly* servitors over a fantastic strip which is just in from... Oh, it doesn't really matter now, they've managed to tear the pages in half. Mmmm. Let's just say that competition will be... keen.

In the meantime, there are Zombies and Vampires to destroy, heresies to be put right, and criminal desperadoes to be brought to justice. Once again, it's time to enter the *Inferno!*


Andy Jones
Editor

**Write to us at — INFERNO!, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Lenton,
Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

A BLACK LIBRARYTM**PUBLICATION****EDITOR**

Andy Jones

WRITERS

Jonathan Green

Andras Millward

Gav Thorpe

James Wallis

ARTISTS

Simon Davis

John Hicklenton

Ralph Horsley

Karl Kopinski

Logan Lubera

David Pugh

Jeff Waye

PRODUCTION

Marc Gascoigne

Ian Pickstock

ADMINISTRATION

Judy Purewal

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by Mark Gibbons

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Product Code: 60 24 99 99 005

ISBN 1-869893-34-4



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THE DEAD AMONG US

BY JAMES WALLIS

THE GOD OF DEATH stared down on me as I prepared the corpse for burial. His hooded eyes were not visible but I could feel his gaze on my hands as they moved over the cold body before me, and he saw that the work was good. The atmosphere in the vaulted room beneath the temple was quiet and damp, smelling faintly of mildew, ashes and of the thousands of the dead of Middenheim who had passed through here on their last journey.

I chanted the words of the ritual under my breath, my mind aware of nothing but their rhythm and the power they held, my hands moving in the sacred patterns of the ceremony. I had done this many times before. The body before me was nothing but a carcass, its soul already blessed and freed and fled to the afterlife. My job now was to seal the corpse, to make sure that no other entity could move in and take possession of this empty shell.

A footfall on the stone steps intruded upon my concentration and broke the spell. Morr was no longer watching; the carving of the patron deity above the altar was just a carving again. The footsteps stopped for a moment, then came on down into the Factorum. The tall, well-aged frame of Brother Gilbertus blocked out the faint light for a moment as he passed through the doorway. I knew it would be him.

'I'm not disturbing you, am I?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said plainly. 'You are. That's the third Funeral Rite incantation you've interrupted this month, Brother, and as penance you will take my place to perform it. This body goes out to be buried in the forest at noon today, so I suggest you start the ritual as soon as you've finished telling me why you're here.'

He didn't protest. Instead he said, 'They've found a body.'

'If you hadn't noticed, brother, this is the temple of Morr, who is the god of Death. We are priests of Morr. Bodies are what we deal with. One more corpse is hardly a reason to barge into the Factorum while another priest is performing a ceremony. Clearly your apprenticeship in Talabheim has taught you little. I may have to give you more lessons.'

He stared at me blankly, my sarcastic tone unnoticed or not understood. I stared back at his greying forelock and the furrows of age around his eyes, and thought for a moment how old he was to be a new priest. But then I had joined the temple late in life as well. Many did.

'It's a woman,' he said. 'Murdered. I thought you'd want to know.'

I blinked. 'Where?'

'Through the heart. With a knife.'

'Where in the city, dolt?'

'Oh. The alleyway behind the Drowned Rat, in the Ostwald.'

'I'm going out.' I pulled off my ritual robes and flung them into the corner of the room. 'Start that Funeral Rite now and you will be finished by the time I get back.'



A COLD JAHRDRUNG wind whistled over the slated rooftops and between the bleak stone buildings of Middenheim. If there had been any leaves on the few trees that grew on the

heights of this rock, the pinnacle in the air that men called the City of the White Wolf, they would have been ripped off and hurled into the sky. But it was the last days of winter, the festival of Mitterfruhl was not passed, and the spring buds were not yet beginning to show. There would be no new life here for some time.

The wind cut through my thin robe as I strode across Moorspark, the frosted grass crunching under my feet, and out into the streets, which grew narrower and less well-kept as they led south-west into the Ostwald district, crowded with early morning bustle. It was bitterly cold. I cursed myself for not putting on a cloak before leaving the temple, but haste was more important than my comfort. Rumours and falsehoods spread fast in a city as compact and tight-knit as Middenheim, and where an unexplained death was concerned, anybody speaking ill of the dead would only hinder my work.

The alley behind the Drowned Rat was narrow, stinking and crowded. A couple of members of the city watch were trying to keep onlookers away and not doing a good job of it, but the gawpers drew back slightly as I approached. The dark robes of a priest of Morr will do that, and it's not out of respect. Nobody likes being reminded of their own mortality.

As the crowd moved apart to let me pass, I saw the bald pate of Watch Captain Schtutt standing beside the corpse. He looked up, saw me and smiled in recognition, his face creased by middle-age and good living. We'd known each other for years, but I didn't smile back. He started to say something by way of a greeting, but I had already crouched down by the body.

It was a woman – or it had been. Probably turned twenty; probably beautiful. Dark brown hair with a wave to it. Something about her face said she had Norse blood, although with one eye and most of a cheek missing it was hard to tell for sure. She had the most delicate ears. Her clothes, gaudy but cheap, had been slashed all ways with a blade of some kind – a hunting knife or dagger, I guessed –

before the fatal blow had slipped between her ribs and into her heart. This had been a competent murder, and someone had tried hard to make it look like something less polished. Her left arm was missing, and someone had thrown a rough brown blanket over an object a couple of feet from her. Blood from the cobbles had begun to seep into its fabric.

She wasn't Filomena. Filomena had been blonde.



I REMEMBERED WHERE I was, and looked up at Schtutt. 'What's under the blanket?'

He muttered, 'Don't lift it,' and there was something nervous in his voice. Then he turned to the pack of vultures and gossip-seekers and spoke loudly: 'All right, bummer off the lot of you. Nothing more to see. Constable, get them out of here. Give the priest of Morr room to do his magic.'

I wasn't planning any magic but the suggestion of it, together with the taint of death in this narrow place, was enough to clear most of the crowd away quickly. Good old Schtutt.

He looked down at me for a second, his expression filled with some stress I couldn't identify, then bent down and raised one corner of the blanket. Underneath was something not human: a limb, maybe four feet long. It had no hand or bones, but large cup-like suckers along the underside. It smelled of decay and something bitter and sharp, like wormwood and stale wine.

It startled me. I felt Schtutt's gaze on my back, and the other watchmen too. Were they looking at the thing under the blanket, or watching to see how I'd react to it? I realised I was breathing fast, and steadied myself. Deep breath. Priests of Morr don't panic. They must not. They cannot be seen to.

'Right,' I said, and stood up. Be firm. Decisive. 'We need a cart to get all this

back to the temple. High-sided if possible.'

'I saw a soil-collector's wagon on the way here,' one of the watch suggested.

'That'll suit. Go and fetch it.' I waited until he had gone, then gestured down at the blanket. 'How many saw this?'

'Two or three.'

'Make sure they don't talk about it. Harass them, put the fear of Ulric in them, anything short of cutting out their tongues. The last thing we need is a panic about a mutant in the city.'

'Mutant,' Schtutt said. His voice was flat, like an echo. It was as if he hadn't dared to use the word until I'd spoken it out loud, confirming his worst fears. A tentacled limb? Well, it hadn't been hacked from a bog-octopus or a kraken from the Sea of Claws, not in an alley in the Ostwald. But now he'd said the word, I had to stop him saying it again where people might hear him.

'There'll need to be a full investigation. A dissection. If it is a... well, we'll burn it quietly. For the sake of Ulric, don't go talking about mutants around the city. Even among the watch. Keep it to yourselves. But circulate the girl's description: age, height, dress, everything except the arm.' I rubbed my hands; they were freezing. 'We've got to get the body back to the temple so I can start. Where's that bloody wagon?'

It arrived, and the body was loaded unceremoniously into the cart, the soil-collectors not too happy about having their work interrupted. Nobody wanted to touch the thing under the blanket. Eventually I bundled it up in its covering and dropped it beside the corpse, in the back of the stinking wagon, then stood back so I could wipe my hands on my thin robe where Schtutt wouldn't see me do it.

The drayman flicked his whip, the elderly horse strained at the traces and the cart rumbled slowly over the filthy cobbles of the slum-streets towards the open space of Moorspark and the temple at its centre. Schtutt and I walked behind it.

'Any idea who she was?' I said.

'Apart from being a--' Schtutt caught my glare. 'No, we don't. She was dressed like a tavern wench or maybe a night-girl, but she couldn't have got work with an arm like that. Although maybe she disguised it with magic. She could have lured someone into the alley, dropped the disguise, and then he killed her out of horror.'

'Or maybe it was a cult killing. They say there's powerful cults of Chaos-worshippers in the city. We do find sacrifices. Cats, mostly.' He shivered. 'If I thought there was going to be trouble with Chaos, I'd take my family and leave Middenheim. Go north. My brother has an estate about thirty miles away. Would thirty miles be far enough, you think? To escape the Dark?'

I didn't reply. I was following my own thoughts. Schtutt seemed happy to continue talking without a reply.

'We shouldn't have to wait for them to act. We should track them down and burn them. Burn their homes too. To the ground,' he said, and there was a certain relish in his voice. 'Get some witch-hunters to come and investigate. Remember those two who came up from Altdorf? Seventeen Chaos-worshippers found and burnt in three days. That's the sort of men we need. Eh? Dieter?'

That broke my concentration. Nobody called me Dieter these days – not in eight years, not since I'd entered the Temple. I looked across at him, meeting his gaze in silence. After a moment he looked away.

'Ulric's beard,' he muttered. 'You're not the man you were. What have they done to you in that temple of ghouls?'

I could think of a hundred replies but none of them fitted the moment, so I said nothing. Silence is the first thing a priest of Morr learns. I had learnt that lesson well. A wordless void stretched between us, until Schtutt filled it.

'Why do you do it?' he asked. 'That's what I don't understand. I remember when you were one of the best merchants in Middenheim. Everyone came to you for everything. You weren't just rich, you were--'

'I was loved.' Schtutt went silent. I continued, 'Loved by my wife and son, who vanished. You know that. Everyone knows. They were never found. I spent hundreds of crowns, thousands, looking for them. And I neglected my trading, and my business failed so I gave it away, and I joined the Temple of Morr and became a priest.'

'But why, Dieter?' That name again. Not mine, not now. 'You can't find them there.'

'I will,' I said. 'Sooner or later their souls will come to Morr, and be received by his hands, and I will know it. It's the only certainty I have any more. It was the not knowing that was killing me.'

'Is that why you do it?' he asked. 'Investigating the unexplained deaths? In case it's them?'

'No,' I said. 'No, it just passes the time.' But I knew I was lying.



THE CART trundled across the hard earth of Moorspark, still too solid for burials, and stopped outside the temple. The dark stone of the building and the bare branches of the high trees around it were silhouetted against a sky that was grey and heavy with snow yet to come, like outstretched hands offering a closed box to an unseen god.

Schtutt and his deputy carried the body down the stone steps into the vaulted gloom of the Factorum while I followed, the blanket and its unpleasant contents in my arms. There was no sign of Gilbertus, or the corpse he had been preparing for burial. Good.

The girl's body was laid on one of the grey granite slabs, and I placed the tentacle next to it, still wrapped in its blanket. The stench of the soil-wagon clung to the corpse's clothes, but there was another odour, bitter and unpleasant.

In the quiet and the semi-darkness she could almost have been any beautiful

woman lying asleep. I stared at her still form. Who was she? Why had she been killed so deliberately, so coldly, and the deed disguised to look like something else? Did she have a powerful enemy, or was she dead for another reason? Was she more important dead than alive? The arm...

Schtutt shuffled his feet and coughed. I could sense his uneasiness. The bodies on the other slabs could have had something to do with it.

'We'd best be going,' he said.

'Yes,' I said abruptly. I wanted to be alone with the body, to try to get some feel for who or what had killed her. It's not that I like dead people. I don't. I just prefer them to the living.

'We'll need an official report,' he said. 'If it's mutant business the Graf will have to be told. You'll dissect her today?'

'No,' I said. 'First we do the rituals to rest her soul.'

No, not 'we'. I would do the rituals personally.

'Then we do the dissection - for the records, and for the Graf's precious paperwork. Then, if we can't find a next of kin, she gets a pauper's funeral.'

'Off the Cliff of Sighs?' asked Schtutt, shock in his voice. 'But surely mutants must be burnt? To cleanse them?'

'Did I say she was a mutant?' I asked.

'What?'

I grasped the section of tentacle that had lain beside the corpse, and shoved it at him. It felt cold and rubbery in my hand, and damp. Schtutt recoiled like a slapped dog.

'Smell it,' I said.

'What!'

'Smell it.' He sniffed at it, cautiously, then looked at me.

'Well?' I asked.

'It's... sour. Bitter. Like something stale.'

'Vinegar.' I put down the unclean flesh. 'I don't know where that came from, but I do know it wasn't attached to anyone who was alive this morning. The damn thing's been pickled.'

SCHTUTT AND HIS MAN went eventually, promising that they'd try to find out who the girl had been. I almost asked them not to. The last way you're going to learn anything about a death in the Ostwald, with its twisting alleys and shadowy deals, is to have heavy-booted watchmen asking questions with all the subtlety of an unwashed ogre. Even if they got an answer it wouldn't do any good. I still wanted to find out who the girl was, but the more I thought about this, the more I suspected that it was her death, not herself, that was important. Someone had wanted to convince people that there were mutants in the city, and they would have managed it if the investigation had been left to the likes of Schtutt.

He wasn't a bad man, I reflected as I prepared the ritual. We'd known each other quite well in the days before I joined the temple: he'd been a young merchant trying to muscle in on trade franchises held by families much older and more powerful than his. He hadn't done well, but he hadn't given up, I'll say that for him. Then the Sparsam family had framed him for evading taxes, and part of his punishment had been a month with the city watch. And that was that: he found his niche in life there, and he was a much better watch captain than he'd been a merchant. Which didn't mean he was much of a watch sergeant.

I lit the last of the candles around the body, sprinkled some blessed water over the body with the appropriate ritual gestures, breathed deeply, and began the deep, slow chant of the Nameless Rite. Inside, I was waiting. The spirit of Morr moved over me and through me, within the patterns I had created with my hands and my mind, and flowed out from me to encompass the body of the woman before me, to bless it and protect it from evil.

And stopped. Something was resisting.

The energy of the Lord of Death hovered in me, waiting for me to use it. But I felt as if I was trying to force two lodestones together: the harder I pushed, the closer I came to the body, the greater was the repulsion. I kept chanting,

drawing more of Morr's energy to me, trying to spread it out over the corpse, but it slipped away like rain off oiled leather. Something was wrong, very wrong. But I wasn't going to give up. I chanted on, summoning all my force, pushing Morr's power out over the corpse. The nameless resistance pushed back. I couldn't break it. Impasse.

One of the candles guttered and snuffed out, burnt down to its stub. It had been three, maybe four inches long when I'd started the ritual. Hours must have passed. I let my chanting cease and the divine power slipped away, taking the last of my energy with it. My knees felt like green twigs, and I felt myself swaying with exhaustion. Alone in the shadows, I stared at the body. The Factorum was absolutely quiet except for my own faint panting, absolutely still – but not tranquil. It was tense, as if waiting for something. The chill of the spring and the cold stones stuck needles through my robe and I shivered. For an instant I felt what the normal people must feel in here: the terror of being surrounded by the dead. The terror of not understanding.

I snuffed out the remaining candles between my fingers and hurried away, upstairs, to the comparative warmth of the main body of the temple, and felt my momentary fear fade as I did. For a moment I considered visiting the main hall and praying for a while, but instead I slipped in through the side entrance that led to the priests' private chambers, headed down the narrow stone corridor, and knocked on the door to Father Zimmerman's room. I felt uneasy about having to do this, but sometimes the only way to deal with a problem is to kick it upstairs.

There was a shuffling from within the room, a muffled voice, and then the door opened part-way from the other side and Brother Gilbertus squeezed out. I was reminded of a cat moving through a small space, or a snake. He smiled his bland smile at me and disappeared off towards the refectory. I pushed the door fully open and entered. Father Zimmerman was sitting at his writing desk. It looked as

if he had been drafting a letter. Ink stained his fingers, and there were broken quills on the floor. He turned round, and I saw there was ink on his white beard too.

'What is it?' he said. There was irritation in his voice: not, I guessed, from having his meeting interrupted. It probably had more to do with the fact that he didn't like me. That was fine by me. I didn't like him either.

'There's a new body in the Factorum, Father.'

'Bodies are our stock in trade, Brother. You may have observed that in the years you have been working here.' I thought of my words to Gilbertus earlier that day, and cursed the Talabheimer. He'd been here, telling tales of my disrespect for the dead, no doubt.

'I've been trying to bless it for burial,' I said. 'The blessing won't take. It's as if something is resisting it.'

'This would be the mutant girl?'

Bugger the Talabheimer, and bugger him again. 'Yes, but she's not--'

'You waste too much time with street-scum and the dregs of life, Brother. It's not a good attitude for a temple such as ours, with a certain standing in the community. You should think of other things, and spend more of your time on the good works that I have suggested you pursue.'

'I don't work for you. I work for Morr.'

'Perhaps you would be happier working for him with a solo ministry? We have been asked to establish a shrine in one of the Wasteland towns to deal with their plague victims, you know. I could recommend you for the post.' He gestured to the writing desk. Obviously matters of transfer and administration were on his mind, but then he'd always been a petty status-minded pen-pusher, more concerned with appearances than with the real business of Morr's work. I hated him, but I realised that I wasn't going to get what I needed without an apology, so I gritted my teeth and backtracked.

'I'm sorry.' A breath. 'But we have a

corpse down in the Factorum which I can't cleanse and prepare for burial. I don't know if it's enchanted or what else, but I thought you might know, and I thought you'd want to be told about it.'

'And you thought that I, being an older, more experienced and more powerful priest, might perform a Purification Rite on it for you? You did.'

I did, so I nodded – and saw his expression change, and instantly knew I'd made a mistake. It was the answer he'd wanted. He glowered at me. I could feel his dislike now, and I'd given him an excuse to vent it.

'You thought,' he hissed, 'that the senior priest of the temple of Morr in Middenheim has time to sully his hands blessing the corpse of some street tart?'

'I didn't--'

'You presume to ask me to waste my time with one of your low-lives, and a mutant to boot? You dare to come in here and insult...'

I lowered my head and let the words wash over me. It was nothing I hadn't heard before. The antipathy between Father Albrecht Zimmerman and me was the main reason I was still only a second-tier priest after eight years in the temple, and was unlikely to rise higher. I'd accepted that. The Father might be close to retirement but I knew his place would go to someone who acted like he did, thought like he did and disliked me as much as he did. Probably Gilbertus, who might be new but who seemed to be doing a lot of wheel-greasing recently. Ambitious, that Gilbertus. That letter on the Father's desk was probably about him.

Eventually the words slowed and stopped. A new paragraph was about to begin, so I started paying attention again.

'As penance, I want you to go to the Cliff of Sighs, where you will find Brother Ralf, who is due to officiate at a funeral. You will take over for him. Then come back here and pray to Saint Heinrich that your good intentions do not overcome your common sense. Pray hard, Brother. Pray until the tenth bell. That is all.'

I left.

IT WAS NIGHT. I lay awake on my hard, narrow bed, and stared at the pattern of the moonlight as it fell on the stone wall of the tiny window of my tiny cell, the harsh brightness of Morrslieb's aura slowly eclipsing the warmer glow of Mannslieb. My body was completely exhausted, drained from the energy of the ritual I had performed that day, but I knew I would get no sleep tonight. It was too cold for a start, spring or no spring, and my single blanket did a bad job of keeping me warm enough to get comfortable. Besides, my mind was filled with the dead girl.

Who had she been? Where had she come from, to die so ignominiously on the streets of Middenheim? Had her death got anything to do with who she was, or had she simply been in the wrong tavern, with a kind word for the wrong man, who had led her into a dark back alley as dawn approached and stuck her over and over again with a short knife, carefully angling his blades to make the attack look frenzied. And then cut off her arm, to replace it with something inhuman, hiding her real one – he must have had a bag with him, probably a big one, and watertight – and sneak away.

I could visualise the sort of man he must be, but right now I wasn't interested in him. I wanted to picture her.

She had been beautiful once. Perhaps she had been beautiful last night: what was left of her complexion hadn't had the flowy gin-blossoms of an old street-walker. Laugh lines had creased the fresh skin around her mouth and eyes, and she wore no make-up. This was not a woman who had relied on her physical charms to earn a living. Not for long, anyway.

What had brought her, this Norse beauty, to Middenheim? The Norse were too pragmatic and down-to-earth to believe the old stories of the cliff-top city with its streets paved with the gold dug from the mountain below. Something other than dreams of foreign places and easy fortunes brought her here. It was probably the arm of a merchant or traveller – possibly Norse but probably not: they were loyal to their own,

particularly abroad – who had abandoned her when she made eyes at another man or got pregnant, or any of the thousand other reasons that men break their promises to women.

How long had it been since the stability and love she had thought were hers had been revealed as a hollow joke? Her clothes had seemed quite new and probably too expensive for the sort of woman who drank in the Drowned Rat, so she probably hadn't been on the streets too long. Unless she'd robbed someone recently. No. People can disguise themselves in life, but a dead face reveals the true character behind it, and I had seen nothing of the petty criminal in remained of her features. There was nothing of the ground-down, hardened street-walker there either. She'd been new to the idea of having to rely on her charms and a low-cut dress to earn a living. Or new enough that she didn't yet know how to spot the sort who would be good to her, and the sort who hated her kind and wanted nothing but ill for them.

Someone in the city had to know who she was, and I wanted to bless her with her real name when I buried her. Someone knew. It might be the person who had killed her, and that meant I had to find him. Nobody at the Drowned Rat would admit to remembering a thing about last night – it was that kind of a place, and not even the fear of Morr would persuade them to talk.

There was a faint sound, a sudden vibration that seemed to run through the temple building. It came again a few seconds later. Then a pause, and a third. From somewhere further down the corridor came a scrape of wood, and the thud of a thrown-open door. Running footsteps. I thought briefly about getting up to investigate, decided that I was still too tired from the failed ritual, and rolled over. Let Zimmerman sort it out. If he was so protective of his status as head of the temple, let him take some of the responsibility that came with the position. I went back to my thoughts.

That arm – the arm that wasn't hers. It all came down to that. There are easier

ways to spread the fear of Chaos and mutation around a city like Middenheim than faking the murder of a mutant in an alley. So why? The only other reason I could think of was that a dead mutant would spark an official enquiry. Lots of paperwork. Probably a promotion for someone in the Watch. Maybe a witch-hunt, and a couple of old women burnt. And the temple would be involved, because we'd have to dissect the body and make the official report. Which meant that the first place the corpse would be brought was here. But why? And why the corpse of a tall, fair Norse beauty, as nameless as me, instead of some local good-time girl?

There was a scream, and I jolted to full consciousness – must have dozed off. Someone belted down the corridor outside my room, shouting something. There was a distant crash. Trouble.

I dashed outside, tugging on my robe as I went. It was dark and I couldn't see anyone in the faint moonlight, but there was a lot of noise coming from the main hall of the temple so I headed that way. Unsteady light and shouting told me I was going the right direction. The connecting door was open – no, it was ripped off its hinges and lying on the floor. I jumped over it and arrived in the main hall.

It was mayhem. A tempest had been here. Everything was smashed. The Flames Eternal had gone out again, but in the faint light from the night-lamps on the pillars I could see three priests, two with makeshift weapons – a broom, a rod of office – circling but keeping well back from someone. It was her.



IT WAS HER. The face I'd been imagining as I lay in bed smiled dully, deadly. She looked like hell, as you would if you had been murdered a day ago. Her movements were jerky, abrupt,

and there seemed to be no sight in her eyes or expression on her face except a blank grin. With her one arm she clasped the torso of Brother Rickard. The rest of him lay a few yards away. As I watched, she dropped the body and began to cast her head from side to side, as if trying to feel for something with some strange inhuman sense. It was like... I didn't know what it was like.

'Stay back!' It was Father Zimmerman. I doubted any of us had any intention of getting any closer. He struck a stance and began to chant. From the sound of his syllables it was a ritual, but not one I recognised. The dead woman's head snapped upright, as if she had found what she was searching for. Then she took a slow, stiff step towards him.

'Father! Move!' I yelled as I looked desperately for a weapon to defend myself. The cult of Morr has never been big on armaments, and its temples aren't exactly prepared for battle. The corpse took another step towards the Father. He kept chanting, faster now, and there was panic on his face. I could have run in to pull him to safety but I didn't; instead I ran away, up towards the high altar. The flattened disc of the great bowl lay there, its gold plate and the heavy liquid in it gleaming slickly in the low light. Behind me there was a scream, high like an old woman.

I reached around the rim of the bowl and lifted it with both hands. It was heavy with the liquid, which sloshed between the shallow rims. As I turned with it, I heard the snap, and an instant too late saw Father Zimmerman die, his spine broken like an autumn twig. The dead woman dropped his body and it hit the floor, twitching.

I took measured paces across the marbled tiles. The liquid slopped in the great bowl, a little spilling out with each step. The puppet-corpse was casting its head around, looking for a target as I drew closer to it. The other two priests backed away from us both. She was fifteen feet away. Ten. Her head turned in my direction, and her slashed face bared its teeth at me in a dead smile.

I flung the great bowl at her, its contents flying outwards in a wild shower. Not holy water but oil, blessed for the anointing of mourners. It covered her, soaking the remains of her once-fancy clothes. The bowl hit the floor edge-on with a clang and spun away. I leapt backwards, grabbed a night-lamp from its niche on the nearest pillar and flung it at the sodden abomination.

It was like a flower blossoming, or the sun breaking through clouds. The temple was filled with the light from the burning woman. She blazed. Something in her must have sensed what was happening as she slowly began to flail against the flames. She fell over. Her body crackled. There was a smell of roasting.

The other two priests – Ralf, I could see now, and Pieter – stood in shock and watched as the body and the temple burned. I didn't have time for that; I headed for the main doors and outside into the fierce chill of the night, my mind working furiously as I went. Dead Norse women. Missing arms. Animated corpses. On the steps I saw Gilbertus coming up.

'Where are you going?' he said.

'To raise the alarm.'

'I've done that. What was it?'

'An animated corpse. Someone was controlling it. The Father is dead.'

'Ah.' He didn't seem surprised. 'Are you coming back inside?'

'No,' I said. 'For one thing it's on fire, and for another I know who killed that girl.'

'Oh. Who?'

'A necromancer,' I said. 'A necromancer with a grudge.'



IF YOU WANT to know about grudges, you have to talk to a Dwarf. I didn't relish the idea of having to go and see this particular Dwarf at this time of night,

not because he'd be in bed – I knew he wouldn't – but because of where he'd be. The Altquartier area was unpleasant enough during the day, but past midnight it was at its worst: the cheapest tarts, the pettiest criminals and the most desperate people. And at its heart lay the Bretonnian House.

Lit by harsh moonlight, the place looked just as tattered as I remembered it: an old, small tavern, its front black-painted, with cracked panes of glass in the windows and the stale smell of boiled cabbage seeping from the cheap eating room above. It looked closed but I knew it wasn't; places like this were never closed, if the patron or a regular owed you a favour. In years gone by I'd had some good evenings, some useful tip-offs and two fights in here. I hoped that the latter wouldn't be repeated tonight.

I knocked on the door, and after a few seconds it opened a crack. 'Who's there?'

'I'm looking for Alfric Halfnose,' I said.

'Who wants him?'

'Tell him...' I paused. 'Tell him it's the man who was Dieter Brossmann.'

The door closed. I could imagine the conversation that was happening on the other side. After a long minute it opened, to reveal a short, scrubby man with a pudding-bowl haircut. 'Enter,' he said.

I did. There's a trick with long robes and dresses that all high-born ladies know and all priests should learn: keep your steps light and short and silent, and if you do it right it looks like you're gliding, not walking. With the black robes of a Morr worshipper, it can look very eerie. The place had fallen silent as I came in, and the quiet lay over it like a blanket of cold dew as I moved across the small room. There were maybe ten people in, from cheap hoodlums drinking cheap beer to the less disreputable with glasses of wine or absinthe in front of them.

A man in a flat black Bretonnian hat, seated at the bar, nodded and raised a glass to me. His face was cracked with age and hard living like an old painting, and his eyes looked like bloodshot poached eggs. I recognised him from the old days, but couldn't remember his name. He

probably had several.

There was a sound from one of the booths at the far end of the room. Nobody looked that way, so I knew it was what I was after and glided over to it. Alfric was sat there, with one of his henchmen and a fat human in opulent robes. The table was covered with empty tankards on the Dwarfs' side, and gold coins. Alfric looked up. There was more grey in his beard than I remembered, and the scars around his ruined nose were a flaming red: a sure sign he'd been drinking heavily. But it would be unwise for me to assume he'd be drunk, or unobservant.

'Good evening, Brother,' he said. 'Sit down. How may I be of service to the temple of Morr this evening?'

I didn't sit. Instead I said, 'Alfric Half-nose, whose family name is Anvilbreaker, I am here to restore the balance of honour between our families.'

'Oh yes?' Alfric didn't look as if he was interested. The fat man was sweating, I noticed. He wasn't a merchant, or at least not a good one: he clearly didn't have the nerve for negotiating tricky deals. Idly I wondered who he was, and what had made him so desperate he'd come to see Alfric after the second bell of the night. He looked worried, but his problems were his own. I had mine to deal with.

'Five years ago,' I started. 'Oh sod it, I'll cut the formalities. You owe me a favour from the time I burnt the body of that storekeeper your grandson shot. I'm calling it in.'

'So I do, so you can.' Alfric took a swig from his tankard. 'You always were impatient. Always wanted things done your way. Your name and your taste in clothes, are they the only things you've changed since your family disappeared?' I said nothing. 'You haven't found them yet, then? Well, if you need some help, you know where to come.'

I knew he was trying to needle me, to show how displeased he was that I'd interrupted his business, so I didn't answer him. Instead I said, 'The temple was attacked this night. Someone animated a corpse against us. It looked

like it was sent to kill people, not do damage, but it did a lot anyway. And Father Zimmerman is dead.' It was the second time I'd said that, but the first time I understood it. Suddenly I felt very tired. There was a spare place on the bench next to the merchant, and I sat down.

Alfric watched me, his dark eyes glinting like wet stones in the faint lamplight. 'Sounds like a necromancer's work.'

'I thought so.' A pause. 'Are there any necromancers in the city?'

'None that I know of. And that means probably not.' He paused for another swig. I trusted his word: Alfric's eyes and ears were everywhere in Middenheim. The Dwarfs had built the place and their tunnels still pervaded it, like woodworm in a rotten cabinet. Alfric and his informants knew them all, and from listening at their secret entrances and watching at their spy-holes, he knew all the city's comings and goings. Best informant and biggest blackmailer in town, Alfric Half-nose.

'So who could have done this? Do you know of anyone with a grudge against the temple?' I asked.

Alfric swilled the beer around his mouth and swallowed. 'Shut up. I'm thinking about necromancers.' He took another slow mouthful and savoured it thoughtfully.

Necromancy, I thought. If it was a necromancer then asking about grudges was pointless. Necromancers hated priests of Morr as much as we hated them. Both sides dealt in death, but we saw it as a passing, a stage in a process. They saw it as a tool. We were interested in freeing souls; they wanted to enslave them with their dark, unholy magics. Of course they'd have a grudge against us. Of course any ambitious necromancer would want to destroy the power of the local Temple of Morr, and if that meant killing its priests – well, like us, bodies were their stock in trade. But there was something about the way the girl's corpse had moved, something about the way it had sought out Father Zimmerman... I grasped for the idea, but couldn't catch it.

Alfric's voice broke my thoughts. 'One of your own corpses, was it? Corpse in the temple?'

'Yes,' I said. 'And there was something—'

'I'll know how that's happened, Brother,' and he leant on that last word. 'That new priest of yours, the one from Talabheim...'

'Gilbertus.'

'Gilbertus. He's sloppy. Doesn't do the blessings properly. In too much of a hurry, like you. You should watch him at the Cliff of Sighs sometime. Goes through the motions all right, enough to fool the mourners anyway. But mark my words, those bodies are going over the cliff unblest. Careless. Dangerous too, if there's a necromancer around: unblest corpses, ready to be raised. Now if there is a necromancer in town – and I'm not saying there is, mind – then be careful. Nasty, necromancers. My grandsire tangled with one. They're fast. If they start to chant at you, count to five, he said. You'll never reach six. You'll be dead by then.'

Something, some idea about necromancers and the Temple, was forming itself in my mind, trying to push its way through the day's exhaustion. I stood up. The thoughts would take a while to clarify and it'd be morning before I'd know if I had heard the answer I needed, but the long cold walk back to the temple would help. 'Thanks, Alfric. The debt is cleared. I'll leave you to your business.'

He looked surprised for a moment, but it took more than that to ruffle his scarred composure. 'Good seeing you again, Dieter,' he said, and turned back to his sweating customer without another word.

I walked to the door and out into the cold night. It had started to snow, and I pulled my robe closely around myself. It was only as I turned the corner away from the Bretonnian House that I realised he'd called me Dieter, and that I had forgotten to ask him anything about the dead girl. A brief image of her burning face with its dead smile flickered in my mind. Somehow her identity didn't seem so important now.

THE CLIFF OF SIGHS is a place where contradictions meet. From its edge you can see the whole of the Middenland stretching away as far as the Middle Mountains: hills, tiny towns and the vast green carpet of the Drakwald Forest with the Talabheim road winding its way through it. In the days when I could still appreciate beauty, I thought it the most romantic and lovely place in the city. Step closer to the edge, look down and you see the shattered ruins of the coffins, the shrouded bodies spread across the rocks or hanging in the branches of the trees after being dropped, and sometimes the unconsecrated corpse of a suicide or murder victim as well.

Or you could have done if it wasn't snowing so damned hard. I wrapped my cloak more tightly around me, and watched the mid-morning funeral party. Gilbertus's voice was muffled by the snow but I knew the sombre incantation he was chanting so well that I would have noticed the slightest error. So far he hadn't put a syllable wrong. Around him, the mourners huddled to protect themselves against the cold, and against their mutual grief and the fear of death. The bare pine coffin sat on its bier at the edge of the cliff. This was not an opulent affair.

Gilbertus turned slightly and I pulled my head back out of sight around the corner of the building. It was bloody cold and the sharp wind was turning my feet and fingers numb, but to move too much would give away my presence. Instead I stood, a silent shivering statue, and listened to the chant.

There. He'd missed something. Nothing as obvious as a dropped word or missing line: just a subtle change to the rhythm of the incantation. Two lines later: again, and quickly again. Then a whole section I didn't recognise.

This wasn't some mis-remembered lesson. He was changing things. I didn't understand the language of the sacred chants – almost nobody did, we just learned them by rote – but I could tell that there was something wrong here. Fear crawled slowly up my spine, and I

would have sweated if it wasn't for the cold.

A final blessing was said, the bier was pushed to the edge of the rock and tipped, the coffin slid off it and into space, and the mourners were ushered away from the cliffside before the crash echoed up from below. They didn't hang around, the party dispersing quickly, eager to get away from this place of death, into the warm, to console each other and start on the funeral meats, I guessed. Gilbertus lingered a moment, and I stepped out to meet him.

'Well met, Brother,' I said.

'Aye, Brother. Cold.' He stamped his feet. 'Are you here for a funeral?'

'In a way,' I said. 'But I want to talk to you about the attack last night.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Unpleasant affair. You've been told there's a meeting after supper to discuss who's to be acting head of the temple?' Something in his tone, his whole stance, had changed. His voice wasn't the voice of an apprentice any more. Yesterday he had spoken to me with respect. Today it was arrogance. He paused and turned away, and I wondered if he didn't want me to see his face as he spoke again:

'Last night you said you thought you knew who was behind the attack. Do you still know?'

'I was wrong last night,' I said.

'Oh yes?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I thought it was a necromancer with a grudge. It's not; it's a necromancer with ambition. Do you feel ambitious, Brother?'

'When it's cold, I feel cold,' he said. A new tone, half-way between fear and aggression, had entered his voice. 'Why don't we find somewhere warm to discuss this?'

'I'm happy here,' I said. 'This won't take long. I've only got four questions. First, if you'd gone to raise the alarm last night, why didn't I see your footprints across the frost in the park?'

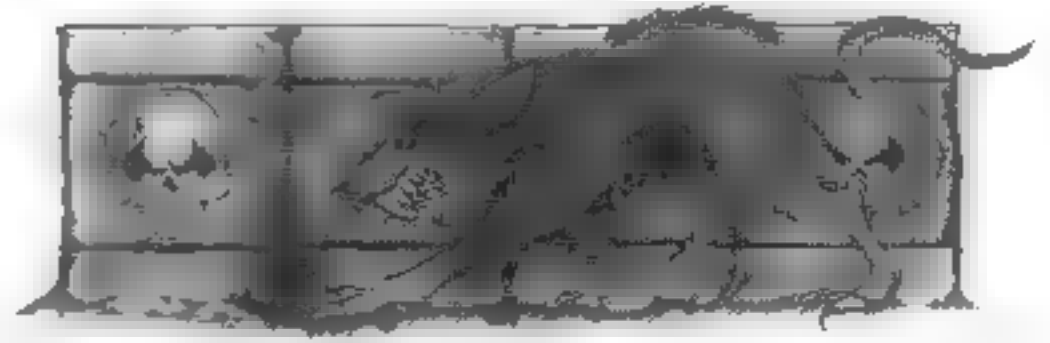
'Because I went a different way to you, clearly. What's the second question?'

'How did you know the dead girl had

been stabbed through the heart?'

'A watchman told me. Next?'

'Where did you get the tentacle?'



HE WHIRLED TO face me and I thought he was about to cast a spell. I did nothing. For a moment he paused, then let his arms drop slowly to his side. He was frightened, I could tell. Frightened but still confident.

'What do you know?' he asked.

'That you're not going to leave this cliff without killing me.'

I stepped towards him, my hands slightly raised, palms and wrists exposed. Merchant's trick. Makes you look vulnerable, unthreatening. He didn't react, or at least he didn't try to move away, which was good.

Instead he said, 'Apart from that.'

'You arrived here six months ago, disguised as a junior priest from Talabheim,' I said. 'We were expecting a Brother Gilbertus to come from there, so I imagine you killed him and took his place. You've spent six months making sure that there are a lot of unblessed corpses buried around the city which you could use your magic to reanimate later.'

'Yesterday morning you killed a girl behind the Drowned Rat, enchanted the corpse, and then made it look like a mutant so it would have to be brought back to the temple for an investigation, and so there wouldn't be too much surprise when I couldn't perform the ceremony of Nameless Rite on it. You also persuaded Father Zimmerman that I was wasting the temple's time, so the corpse would lie in the Factorum all night, unblessed, ready for you to reanimate. When I met you outside the temple, you'd been there all along, controlling the dead thing.'

'You know all that?'

I moved closer to him. Only a few feet

separated us. Behind him, the edge of the cliff dropped away into eternity.

'It's mostly guesswork,' I admitted.

'So much guessing for a ruined merchant still obsessed by the loss of his family. I am impressed.' The disguise had dropped completely now: he wasn't Gilbertus any more. He'd never been Gilbertus at all, except in the minds of some too-trusting priests. If any of them had been around, they wouldn't have recognised this sarcastic arrogant who dared to taunt me with my grief.

But there was no one else: the Cliff of Sighs was deserted. Just us and the swirling snow: he with his plan and his magic, I with a new-kindled memory of Filomena, and the sadness and anger that it brought.

He smiled again. 'So, Brother, why would a priest of Morr – or even a necromancer – do what you've described?'

'Because,' I said, and I didn't try to keep the bile out of my voice, 'because you're ambitious. Because there would be no more powerful position for a necromancer than leading a temple of Morr. All the corpses you need, brought to your doorstep by the good citizens of Middenheim. You probably have some scheme for taking over the city in a couple of years.'

'Perhaps.' He was close to me now, and he wasn't smiling any more. His face was set cold and hard against me. Snowflakes whirled in the space between us. 'And your last question?'

'I was going to ask who the girl was,' I said. 'But it's not important any more.'

'She was young. Strong. Susceptible to my magic. A potential tool. We're alike, you and I, Brother. I had no interest in the girl when she was alive, and neither did you. All the suffering, all the pain in this city, and you only have use for them when they're dead. We could work together. We could learn a lot from each other. And I could use a man like you. What say you? Join me. Come back to the temple. I'll tell you about the girl there.'

'I said it wasn't important.' But his

suggestion had thrown me off-guard. Were we similar? Had I the seed of necromancy in me? Then he started to chant: high-pitched and fast, and my fate suddenly became a lot more short-term.

Count to five, Alfric had said. Five seconds to survive.

One. I moved forward two paces.

Two, and I was in front of him, the dagger drawn out from under my cloak.

Three. I plunged it deep into his stomach. Blood gushed onto my hand, hot over my numbed fingers. I raised my face to his, and our gazes met. His eyes were full of horror.

Four. A long second passed. He didn't stop chanting.

Five. I twisted the knife hard, my fingers slipping against the blood. Gilbertus gave a pain cry. The chant was broken, his spell useless. He paused for an instant, then launched himself at me. The snow-covered ground slid under my feet and I went down.

He landed on top of me, grasping at my neck. I tried to roll away, but he pinned me to the ground. He was bleeding to death, but he was still larger and stronger than me: at the very least he could take me with him.

His fingers found my neck and squeezed, twisting my head to one side. Snow covered my face, filling my eyes and nose with gritty cold. I could feel the warmth of his blood on my stomach, and the hilt of the knife in his wound pressed itself hard against my kidneys. My mind fogged with pain and darkness.

I felt like a dying man. Images formed in my head: faces. Father Zimmerman, his face contorted in death-agony. Brother Rickard, torn in half. Schtutt. My wife, Filomena, and my son Karl, smiling, the last morning I had ever seen them. And the half-face of a dead Norse girl whose name and story I would never know.

No. My job here was not finished. I had Morr's work to do.

Something poured a last burst of strength into my tired limbs. My arms found his, breaking his grip around my neck and pushing him off from me, so he

rolled away across the whiteness of the burial site.

I rolled over to follow him. He was crouching, trying to get to his feet, one hand groping to pull the knife out. I kept rolling, crashing into him. I felt him fall sideways and slip, and then he grabbed my cloak and hung on. For a moment I couldn't understand why, then I felt his weight pulling at me and I knew the truth: we were at the edge of the cliff, and he was part-way over.

I didn't know if he was trying to pull himself back or wanting to take me down with him, but it didn't matter. I was sliding across the snow, being pulled over the edge of the cliff. I flung out my arms and legs, trying to get any kind of grip. All I found was soft snow. I slid further towards death.

My left hand found a small crevice in the rock, and I held onto it for dear life. I could see over the edge now. Below me, Gilbertus – the man I'd called Gilbertus – dangled. One of his hands was wrapped in my cloak, the other grasped desperately at the sheer stone of the cliff. The wind caught his garments, whipping them around him. Below us, an infinity of snow whirled and blew, obscuring everything else.

Gilbertus raised his head and stared into my eyes. His were pools of glistening darkness, like gazing into an ancient well. Even at this moment I could read nothing there. His face was as white as ice. Below, blood still spurted from his wound, spiralling away to the blizzard below.

'Pull me up,' he said. There was weakness in his voice.

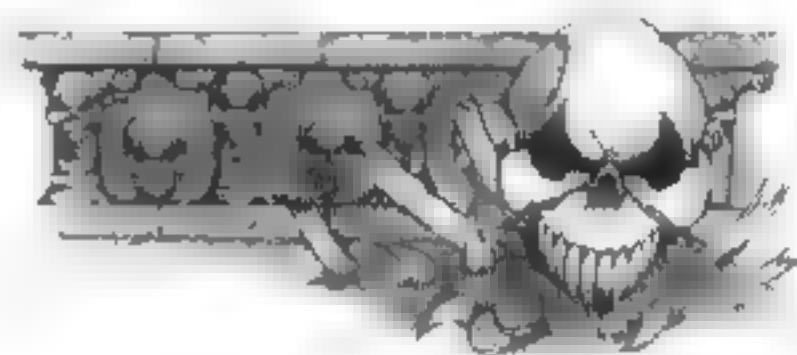
'No,' I said. I wanted to batter away at his hands, to make him let go, but I was afraid that the slightest movement would make me slip further over the edge.

'Pull me up,' he said again, 'and I will take you to your wife and child.'

'You're lying,' I said, and at that moment there was a tearing, rending sound as my cloak ripped across. The necromancer swung sideways across the cliff face, held suspended in the air for a moment by the thicker fabric of the hem, and then it also parted and he dropped.

His body plunged down, fading, blown away among the blizzard, and disappeared into the whiteness. There was no scream or sound of impact. Possibly it was muffled by the snow.

I lay there for a while. Blood hammered in my temples, and my hands reflexively gripped onto whatever they could find. The snow and the rock were cold against my face. It reminded me I was alive.



EVENTUALLY I pushed myself back a yard, slowly, and stood up. Blood stained the area, but flurries of snow were already covering the pools and strands of crimson, and the footprints and marks of the recent scuffle.

My ribs ached. I looked around. The area was still deserted. No signs, no evidence, no witnesses, no complications. I whispered thanks to Morr.

For an instant I saw Gilbertus's face again, felt the weight of him suspended from his fist in my cloak, and heard his last words. He hadn't known anything. He couldn't have known anything. He would have said anything to save himself. No. He had been lying. He must have been.

His spirit had gone to Morr now. Even necromancers had to make their peace with the god of death eventually. It occurred to me that although I still thought of him as Gilbertus, I didn't know his real name.

I turned away, to walk back to the temple. Now Gilbertus was dead his spell should be broken and I should be able to lay the dead girl's soul to rest. I'd say a blessing for his spirit as well, and if anyone asked me what I had done today, I would say that I had given peace to two unquiet souls.

I wondered if I would ever do the same for my own. ●

Greetings your Inestimable Majesty, Prince Humbert III, of the borders,

It was with great sadness and not a few tears that I received the news of your calamitous misfortune. It must trouble your heart deeply that your betrothed, the Lady Elspeth, travelled all the way from Brellonia, only to encounter disaster in your own lands. I am sure this must threaten your proposed alliance with her father. I can only hope that missive brings some spark of hope to your troubled household.

In this regard I can assure your Majesty that the fair Lady Elspeth is still alive, though if left in her frightfully deprived conditions I doubt this will remain the case.

Upon the instant of hearing of her capture by the foul orc warband, and your bountiful reward, I instantly despatched several of men to seek out their whereabouts. These brave, mighty warriors have returned with the following news that I can now relate to your Majesty.

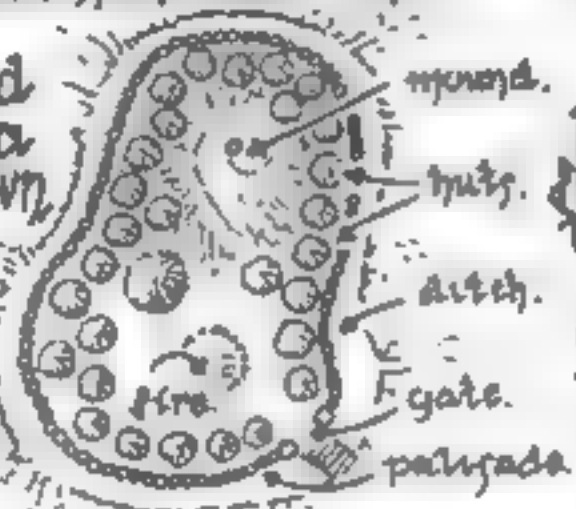
The warband is very large in number, as they must have been to overwhelm Lady Elspeth's retinue, and left behind them a clear trail for wherever roam they despoil the countryside terribly. These mishapen monstrosities follow the river scarce five leagues west of Barak Varr, near where the river Blackgull, and entered what they consider their territory in the Bad-vulgar territorial markings that litter their land tell me that these themselves the 'Split Skull', a typically crude choice of name.



the
these beasts
crossed the
meets the
-lands. the
orcs call

Here it seems they have chosen to set up, what most generously could be called a stockade. At great risk to themselves my men observed this encampment, and further drew a sketch of its entirety. This, I believe will serve to illustrate to his Majesty the need for prompt action in rescuing Lady Elspeth, and the ease with which my men might accomplish the task.

The whole is centred
latter topped with a
have struck them down
surround these in a
that they can not
veteran warriors
which is used as a
the camp through



around the chief's hut, and a shamanistic mound, the
pagan idol. If such a God existed it would no doubt
for such an unpleasantly ugly image. The warband's huts
rough circle, encompassing all is a palisade so ramshackle
even keep their own squigs in, let alone hope to keep
out. The only other attempt at defence is a ditch.
latrine. My scouts swore that they could have found
scent alone.

In general they seem unconcerned about the possibility of attack, and instead indulge in the most barbaric behaviour, all of which seems fuelled by their love of strong liquor, and cruel sport. This mainly involves the torture of captives, although Lady Elspeth has been spared this torment so far. Fights are daily carried out in a pit upon whose outcome they bet. They incessantly bully those weaker than themselves, are ill-disciplined and unmilitary. This makes them vulnerable to a concerted attack.

Their leader, Batsany Split Skull has gathered together many goblins, probably from the crooked moon tribes, to swell his ranks, and to labour for his orcs. They also have chariots, boars broken for riding, an ogre, and even a wyvern. Raiding parties are constantly sent out, and a band of captured dwarves was brought in whilst my men watched on. These poor wretches appear to be from the mighty dwarfhold of Karak Azul, as the orcs bore their captured banners.

I fear much larger, and more devastating raids are intended, for they are currently constructing war-machines. However, their engineering skills are such that these may take some time to complete. Progress is likely to be further hindered by the many barrels of what must be 'bugmoss brew' that were brought in by the raiders. Further concern lies in the observation that some bands of prisoners are being taken away from the camp. Their route seems to be towards the World-Edge mountains and Death Pass. If Lady Elspeth were taken over this fearsome range her tragic fate as an Orc's plaything would be sealed inexorably.

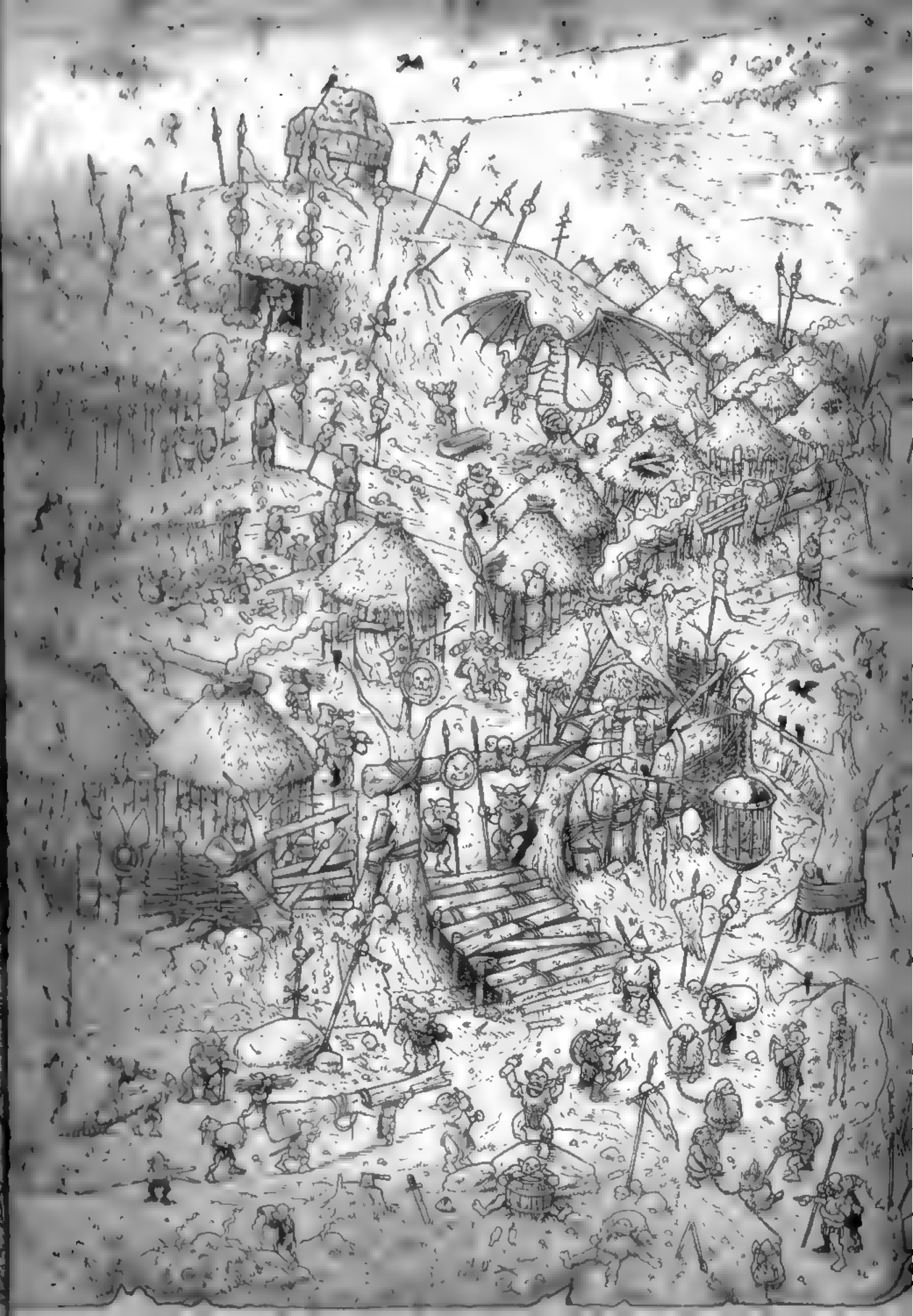
All these facts, and primarily the safety of Lady Elspeth, encourage me to persuade your Majesty to attack immediately. I command several hundred men who would happily serve his Majesty in this endeavour. The reward you have already offered is most generous, but divided amongst so many necessary soldiers, who all have families to support, that may be left fatherless, would need to be increased.

I look forward to serving your Majesty in his conquest of the Split Skull orc warband.

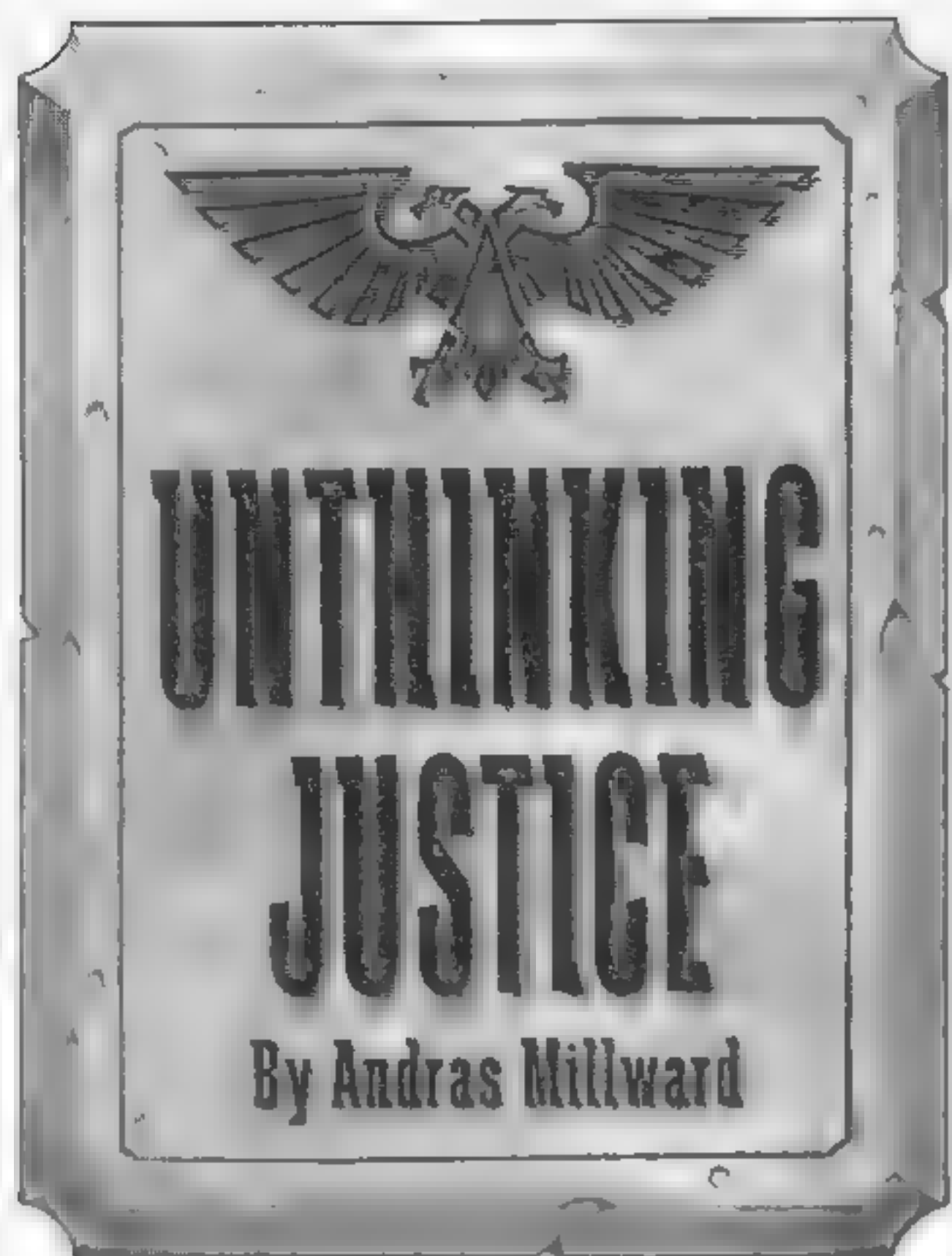
Your humble servant,

Capt. Gustav Helmreik,
Orc-Slayer Extraordinaire.

Gustav Helmreik







AND THOSE *dedicated to the Emperor's work will be beset upon all sides by enemies. Be vigilant for they—*

The door signal sounded. Codicier Levi, of the Librarius of the Imperial Order of Black Consuls, sighed and ran a hand through his close-cropped dark hair. Reverentially, he closed his leather-bound copy of the Codex Astartes, stood up and walked to the window of his Spartan quarters. The landing lights of one of the Chapter Ship's shuttles briefly illuminated his angular, clean-shaven features.

'Enter.' Levi continued looking out of the window, contemplating the vast starry backcloth before him and the inauspicious verse he had read in the Codex. He spoke again, softly, on hearing his visitor enter his quarters. 'A good day for the Emperor's work, Standard Bearer.'

A short laugh came from behind him. 'Your powers do you justice as always, Levi. But surely all days are fitting for His blessed work, Brother Librarian. Or does your faith wane in these dark days?'

Levi turned to face his visitor. Brother Aeorum, Standard Bearer of the Black Consul's Third Company, stood smiling in the doorway. A powerfully built man, he was dressed as Levi was, in a black tunic

edged with yellow. Levi gave a rare smile of his own. 'Aeorum, it's good to see you on this ill-omened day. Come in.'

Levi welcomed the unexpected appearance of the youthful Standard Bearer. He studied the broad face before him, the scar that ran across one cheekbone and the bridge of Aeorum's nose. The deep mark, left there long ago by a Genestealer's claw, may have faded with time but the Standard Bearer had changed little since they had last met. Decades ago, Levi and Aeorum had served together in the Black Consuls' Scout Company, their friendship forged in Tyranid blood during the bloody and costly battle for Manalar. While Levi's psychic powers had taken him to the Librarius, Aeorum's fearsome fighting ability had led to him being the youngest Standard Bearer in the Chapter's history. They met infrequently these days, but the inhuman terrors they had faced together ensured that the bond between them remained as strong as ever.

Aeorum sat down opposite Levi, his muscular bulk dwarfing the plain wooden chair. 'Ill-omened? So you've heard the news?'

'Heard what?' Levi asked. He'd already picked up enough warning tremors during the previous day's preparations, but had not heard anything concrete about their current objectives. Both Second, Third and Fourth Companies had been mobilised, which suggested that the Imperium was responding to the gravest of threats.

'The Black Consuls have picked up a distress call from Suracto. Nearly half the planet has rebelled, Brother. The Emperor's hold on the planet is threatened and we speed to answer their call. Captain Estrus will brief us later this morning.'

Levi nodded. 'So I understand. But this is grave news indeed, and explains the speed with which we were dispatched. Suracto has been a shining beacon against the encroaching darkness we face across the galaxy. An orderly, productive planet as I recall, unquestioningly loyal to the Emperor. We cannot let planets such as these slip from the Emperor's grasp.'

'You are not idle at the Librarius, I see,' Aeorum said, though there was little humour in his voice. 'Suracto has voluntarily yielded tithes a third higher than all other neighbouring planets in the system for the last five years. To see such a planet fall to disorder and disarray is a near-catastrophe for the Imperium.'

Levi nodded. 'What manner of heresy threatens the planet?'

'The rebels reject the Emperor's order and discipline. They claim His way is too harsh, too demanding. They seek a 'more equitable and just way of life.' Aeorum laced his words with scorn. 'Their heretical ways threaten to snuff out your shining beacon, Brother Levi.'

'It shall not be so, Aeorum. Such a fundamental threat to the true order must be eradicated. Completely.' His words hung in the air. Abruptly, the Codicier got up and extended his hand to Aeorum. 'In spite of the circumstances, I am pleased to see you, Brother. As always, it will be a great honour to fight at your side.'



LEVI SENSED Captain Estrus struggling to dampen his annoyance with the newcomer. Less than an hour after the Black Consuls had made planetfall on Suracto another ship had appeared from the Warp, heading directly for the Space Marines' landing site, to the north of the hive city of Thuram. The ship bore the markings of the Inquisition and immediately on landing an Inquisitor, together with a small detachment of stony-faced retainers, had presented himself to the Captain, demanding that all the loyal forces regroup with the Black Consuls in order to reassess the situation.

'Inquisitor Parax, I am simply not interested,' Captain Estrus was saying. His irritation seemed to deepen every furrow on his already heavily lined, tanned face. 'We have made planetfall, but over sixty minutes later we have still not fully

deployed.' Estrus fought to make himself heard over the rumble of the Rhino engines revving behind him and the noise of a nearby squad of Tech Marines and their blank-faced servitors loading missiles onto the Company's Whirlwinds.

Inquisitor Parax's lean face registered no emotion. A slightly built man, clad only in his dark official robes, he struggled to maintain some semblance of authority next to the armoured Space Marine Captain towering above him. 'While I appreciate the subtler points of the Codex, Captain, nevertheless -' he began, but the rest of his sentence was drowned by the piercing noise of a Land Speeder squad roaring immediately overhead.

Once the craft had passed, Estrus spoke at once. 'With respect, Inquisitor, the blessed Codex is not in question here. However, your request to re-group is. We must deploy and go to the aid of the loyalist Suractan forces as soon as possible. Administrator Niall, assistant to Planetary Lord Koln, will rendezvous with us in fifteen minutes and I am sure that he will brief us all, in full. I am most grateful that...' Estrus paused, choosing an appropriate phrase. 'That your Eminence has chosen also to respond to the distress call but we cannot afford to wait and give the rebels any chance to gain the upper hand.'

Parax glanced at the closed faces of the half dozen members of his retinue who stood behind him, his dark eyes narrowing slightly. He gave himself a moment to think, then turned back. 'Very well, Captain Estrus. I accede. But I warn you that the Inquisition will frown upon any rash decisions you may make.'

Estrus's face darkened. 'Inquisitor, I can assure you that the Black Consuls have never made any rash decisions. Company Sergeants, prepare to deploy.' He grabbed his helmet from a nearby Consul and strode towards the Whirlwinds.

Levi watched as the Inquisitor and his retinue returned to their shuttle. An ill-omened day, indeed, he thought. The arrival of the Inquisitor did little to alleviate the sense of foreboding that hung heavy over him. He hefted his

chainsword, checked the armour diagnostic reading on his viewer then turned to follow the Captain.



HIS FACE A mask of hatred, the rebel soldier brought his lasgun to bear on Levi. Reacting with preternatural speed, Levi stepped towards him and brought his chainsword down. The sword's buzzing rose to a brief scream before the man's torso split apart, showering Levi with blood.

The faintest of sensations, at the back of the head. Levi spun smoothly and squeezed off two bolter rounds. The two rebels behind him were hurled into the Rhino's sides, leaving a pair of dark smears on the vehicle's large white Tactical arrow as their lifeless bodies slid to the ground. Catching a glimpse of the Consul's standard, he turned to see Aeorum, knee deep in rebel corpses, calmly aiming and firing his bolt pistol, felling an opponent with each shot. Like the old days, Levi thought, before taking aim with his own bolter.

The rebel ambush had caught the vanguard of the Black Consuls as it began to make its way to the rendezvous point, through the battle-scarred suburban wastes on the outskirts of Thuram City. The ferocity of the rebels had initially caught the Space Marines off-guard but very quickly the attack crumbled in the face of the Black Consuls' disciplined and dogged defence.

The attack was over in a few minutes, with no losses for the Consuls. As they regrouped and prepared to move on, Levi studied the corpses at his feet. Strange how he could not feel any hate for these, the kind of heretical traitors that he had come to loathe during his decades as a Space Marine. He had come to expect feelings of justified anger when dealing with such traitorous vermin, but now those feelings were oddly absent.

Distracted, he strode over to the command Rhino.

Captain Estrus was, once more, suppressing his irritation with the person on the other end of his com-link. 'I don't care what you say, Commander, we have fifty dead rebels at our feet. You will need to re-assess the territorial gains of the insurgent forces. No, it will not affect our ETA. Rendezvous in seven minutes.' Estrus pulled his helmet off as Levi approached and reached for an order scroll from the Sergeant at his side.

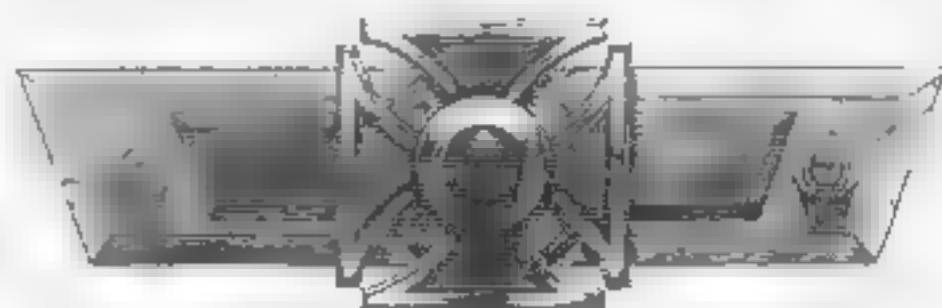
'Brother Codicier, you gave good account of yourself. I am pleased to see that your time at the Librarius honing your psychic skills has not softened your fighting prowess.' He glanced at the scroll in his hand, arching a dark eyebrow. 'I fear, however, that this rebellion has softened the brains of the loyalist commanders.'

Levi tilted his helmet to acknowledge the Captain's remarks. 'I do only my duty as any Black Consul would, Captain.' Distractedly, he looked over at a group of Black Consuls speaking to Aeorum. 'Yet, something troubles me.'

Estrus lowered the scroll, giving Levi his full attention. 'What's that, Librarian? Are we to be beset by more foes before we meet Administrator Niall?'

'I apologise for troubling you, Captain; I cannot pinpoint the source of my vexation.'

'Very well, Librarian, but keep me informed. This disorderly planet also vexes me greatly and I do not wish for further surprises. Stay at my side.' Estrus' helmet-com crackled into life once more and he flicked the speaker on with an armoured thumb and listened to the voice of Inquisitor Parax. He sighed. 'Yes, Inquisitor, we proceed. No, remain in your Rhino ...'



ADMINISTRATOR NIALL was an imposing figure, standing only a few inches shorter than the armoured figures of the Black Consuls nearby. His crimson cloak fluttered in the breeze that blew through the ruined town, the bright colour at odds with the sombre blacks and yellows of the Space Marines' armour. The distant sound of small arms fire and the more regular pounding of battle cannons drifted along the same breeze. Levi studied Niall's face as he spoke earnestly to Inquisitor Parax and Captain Estrus; the Administrator's young face seemed at odds with the premature grey of his long hair and neatly trimmed beard.

'They must all be killed. Every one of them. Suracto has prided itself on its loyalty to the Imperium for decades and we must eradicate every last vestige of the smear that they have brought on our good name. I will not rest until I have personally overseen the execution of every last heretic. He indicated the ruins around him. 'Every last soul in this town was put to death when we discovered the taint of heresy behind its closed doors.'

Parax smiled grimly, his face registering as little emotion as the action could allow. 'Admirable sentiments and noble actions, Administrator Niall, ones with which I concur wholeheartedly. The Inquisition commends your zeal and will seek to aid you in every way possible.'

'And commendable as these rousing speeches are, we do have the Emperor's work to do,' Levi said quietly. 'Let our actions speak first; self-congratulation you may indulge in later.' The three other men turned to look at him. Levi saw a flash of annoyance pass across the faces of both Niall and Parax. Captain Estrus's eyes blazed into life, stirred by his fellow Space Marine's discipline and dedication.

'Codicier Levi is right,' Estrus said. 'Pragmatism must be our watchword. We must act now, before the rebels can regroup. Administrator, what is the current situation?'

Niall continued to stare at Levi for a moment longer before turning to speak to Estrus. 'The main rebel force is on the other side of Thuram City. They have

made some in-roads into the city itself but in the main the walls still hold. They are many, lightly armed save for a few battle cannons. However, their heretical vigour makes them formidable opponents.'

'We shall be the judge of that,' Estrus said. 'Let—'

'Let us use even greater force with which to crush them,' interrupted the Inquisitor. 'Administrator Niall is right. Not one of them can be left standing.'

Estrus frowned. 'Inquisitor, I have warned you—'

'You dare to the warn the Inquisition?'

'I have warned you that I will not brook any interference. We have the Emperor's work before us and by Guilliman, none will prevent us. Come, Administrator Niall, we have much to do.' Estrus led Niall away to the command Rhino. Inquisitor Parax turned his thin face towards Levi. His dark eyes burned with anger for an instant, before he regained his composure. He appeared to want to speak, thought better of it, turned and walked over to his retinue, calling for his armour.

Levi turned to see Aeorum, helmet off, cleaning his bolter. The standard fluttered in the breeze an arm's length away from the Standard Bearer, planted in a small mound of rubble. Aeorum looked up, caught Levi's glance and raised his eyebrows. Levi nodded slowly, holding the Standard Bearer's gaze. Then, as if controlled by a single thought, both Space Marines abruptly looked away and went about their own tasks.



THE BLACK CONSULS were soon where they liked to be: in the thick of the battle, spilling the blood of heretics. The Second and Third Companies had advanced around a side each of the city, whilst the Fourth had moved to bolster the beleaguered loyal

forces in the city itself. Beset on both sides by Space Marines, the rebels' siege was beginning to crumble.

A thick layer of battlesmoke hung over the southern outskirts of Thuram. The air was filled with a confusion of bolter and lasgun fire, the explosion of artillery rounds and the screams of the wounded and dying. Out of the smoky unknown, four lasgun rounds hit Levi in rapid succession, scoring the ceramite plates of his armour and singeing his over-tunic, but failing to penetrate further. He checked his IR scanner, found the sources of the shots and fired his bolter into the drifting pall of smoke. He heard the sound of the two bolter shells detonating as his infrared imaging showed him that they had found their mark – and that more rebels were closing on him from the right.

Three figures emerged from the smoke: lightly armoured men, their pale faces haggard with fatigue. The first was no match for Levi's reactions and barely had an opportunity to register the Codicier's chainsword before it parted his head from his shoulders. The second man, frozen in horror at his comrade's sudden death was himself torn apart by a bolter round. The third man paused, lasgun hanging slackly at his side, gazing at his own reflection in Levi's helmet. Levi paused, dimly aware of the buzzing of the chainsword in his own hand. A distant part of his mind admired the bravery of this rebel, fearlessly squaring up to an Imperial Space Marine. His sword began to describe an arc towards the man.

'In the Emperor's name, brother.' Levi's sword arm froze. The man had not opened his mouth to speak yet Levi had heard the words as clearly as the sound of the chainsword and the battle around him. He probed with his own mind. Psyker! He felt the man's mind coil, gathering momentum for a psychic blast. Instinctively, Levi unleashed a pummelling mental attack of his own, tearing the man's neurons apart. A small trickle of blood began to run from the man's nose before he fell to his knees in front of the Space Marine, his mind destroyed. Levi despatched him with a

single thrust, before powering down the chainsword.

As he stepped over the corpse, Levi became aware of the stillness around him. In the far distance, towards the Second Company's positions, the battle still raged, but in his immediate vicinity, calm had descended. Brother Consuls emerged from the smoke, doffing helmets or re-loading weapons. A cry rang out some distance away. Moments later, an armoured apothecary sped past towards the sound of the cry. A single heavy pistol shot rang out.

Captain Estrus appeared at Levi's side, accompanied by his Sergeant aide. 'This accursed smoke prevents us from assessing the situation, Brother Librarian. We have lost two of our Brothers and three more are injured. Against a foe far more numerous, that is to be expected. But reports are fragmented and I cannot see the greater picture. What can you see?'

Levi reached up for his helmet. There was a sharp hiss as his helmet seals released. The Sergeant stepped forward and took the helmet. Levi breathed deeply and reached out with his mind, probing tentatively at first, then moving further away, gathering impressions, visualising sights, sounds, smells. Satisfied, he moved his perceptions to the city.

'-rarian! Brother Librarian! What's wrong?'

Levi gradually became aware of the Captain's voice once more. Even in his armour, Levi felt cold. He leaned on his chainsword for support as a momentary weakness passed through his body.

'Codicier? How do our Brothers fare?'

'Well enough, Captain. The Second Company suffers but gains the upper hand. For now, the Fourth stand their ground. But I fear we have underestimated the rebels, Captain. The city, Captain...'

Estrus kept his voice calm. 'What of the city, Codicier?'

'It lies in a dark shadow, Brother Captain. The unmistakable shadow of Chaos.'

LEVI HEARD A bone crack as the Inquisitor's finger jabbed one of the prisoners in the chest. Tied to a charred wooden chair, the rebel winced but continued to stare directly at Parax. His voice hoarse after nearly an hour of interrogation, the young man struggled to speak calmly to the armoured Inquisitor. 'And I tell you that we fight for the Emperor, Inquisitor. We are loyal to the Imperium. We are on your side. I can't say it any clearer.' The men huddled in the shadows behind him murmured in agreement. A glance from the Black Consul guard at their side silenced them.

Parax whirled to face the others in the burnt out room where they had assembled a dozen prisoners taken in that first exchange. Drawn and tired as they were, all the rebels had said the same thing: they were loyal to the Emperor and Chaos had taken a hold in Planetary Lord Koln's Palace. Inquisitor Parax's impatience had long been exhausted; a barely-controlled rage tinged his voice as he spoke.

'Brother Space Marines, Administrator: we can see clearly here how Chaos warps the mind and sullies the soul. They are compelled, against their wills perhaps, to utter these profanities and heresies, even when the truth of the matter is self-evident. Suracto's peril is grave indeed.' He paused and lowered his head, staring at the floor. Much as he disliked the showy flamboyance and melodrama of the man, Levi felt that he had to agree with the Inquisitor. Chaos had so warped the minds of these rebels that they must have had no shred of understanding left. A grave peril, indeed.

Before Parax could say anything further, the bound rebel spoke again. 'The biggest profanity is that Chaos walks Suracto, clothed in Imperial garb and—'

Before the noise of the autopistol shot had died away a dozen servo-motors whirled into life as the Black Consuls instinctively targeted Administrator Niall. The Administrator slowly lowered his pistol and at a sign from Estrus, Levi, Aeorum and the other Space Marines lowered their own weapons. The force of the shot, hitting the prisoner in the throat, had pushed the rebel's chair over

and he had been dead before he landed at his horrified comrades' feet.

'Such heresy! I could not bear to hear it,' Niall said, returning the autopistol into the folds of his cloak. 'I have spent far too long building this administration for the greater glory of the Emperor to hear such filth spoken so brazenly.'

'You have my sympathy, Administrator,' Parax said, gesturing discretely. Two of his stony-faced retainers appeared in the tattered doorway. 'Take those vermin away and dispose of them.' Using the ends of their lasguns, the two retainers began to herd the rebels out of the door.

'Wait a moment.' Levi stepped forward, an unwelcome sense of unease playing in his mind. 'We must not be hasty...'

Parax squared up to the Librarian. 'You plead for these traitorous scum? Where do your loyalties lie, Consul? You do not—'

'His loyalties remain true, Inquisitor!' Parax involuntarily stepped away from Levi as Estrus's iron voice cut him short. 'Doubt it not. But my Brother Librarian is right. We may miss an opportunity to find out more about the deployment of the rebel forces if we—' A series of lasgun shots sounded outside. Estrus groaned. 'Inquisitor, we are on the same side yet your rash behaviour threatens to disrupt our operations here.'

'Are you sure that we are on the same side, Captain? Or has this cunning heresy affected you?'

As the Captain's hand moved to his bolter, Levi sensed a strong psychic presence approach the ruin. He heard the crackle of Chaplain Mortem's Crozius Arcanum moments before the battle rod and the fully-armoured figure of his holy Brother dwarfed the ruined doorway.

'Brothers, we must move out,' Mortem said breathlessly. 'The Second Company is overwhelmed. A counter-attack, Brother Captain – and it seems like the entire planet is against us.'



A BARRAGE OF Whirlwind missiles roared overhead as the speeders of the Second Company's tenth squad screamed towards the heart of the rebel force. The rebel force had appeared unexpectedly from the south and were swarming towards a breach in the city walls. The missiles screamed into the distance; a series of explosions lit up the horizon. Satisfied that the rebels' artillery capability had been disposed of, Estrus ordered the Third Company to advance.

Aeorum, standard grasped in one hand and bolter in the other, led the first and second squads into the heart of the rebel counterattack. Possessed of an almost daemonic rage, rebels hurled themselves bodily at the Black Consuls but their attacks were in vain as black-armoured fists crushed skulls, bolter shells tore muscle and sinew apart, flamers and melta-guns incinerated skin and bone. Very soon, both squads struggled to make headway, their progress impeded by the waves of rebel dead at their feet.

Levi tore his chainsword free from a dead rebel and in one smooth movement turned and hammered the pommel into the face of his compatriot. The blow shattered the man's forehead with an audible crack, killing him before his limp body began its fall to the ground. Kicking the corpse to one side, Levi followed the men of the third and fourth squads towards Thuram's breached walls. How he wished he could take his helmet off so that he could spit out the growing feeling of the rebels' hatred, for it had become a vile taste in his mouth. The deadly hiss of a melta-gun made him glad he was still fully armoured. A wave of anguish washed over the Librarian as the Consul next to him was reduced to dust. Levi scanned the enemy ranks for the weapon – there, less than twenty paces away, but there were too many of his brothers in the way. The melta-gun fired again and another Consul exploded into a super-heated ball of flame.

Time to fight fire with fire, thought Levi grimly.

'Brother Consuls, hold your positions, hold your positions!' Unquestioningly, the Space Marines heeded the Codicier's

order and stopped in their tracks. Muttering a short prayer to the Emperor, Levi focused his mental energies on the ground beneath the rebel melta-gunner. With no further warning a white hot ball of flame erupted upwards from the ground, exploding outwards, engulfing the melta-gunner and a dozen men around him.

Seemingly unfazed by the unexpected loss of their comrades, the remaining fifty rebels regrouped and charged both squads. A woman brought her autorifle to bear on Levi, but hesitated before firing. 'Rot in hell, Spawn of Chaos!' she screamed. She opened fire, the gun on full auto, spraying Levi with bullets. Levi advanced against the hail of bullets that were bouncing ineffectually off his armour. Out of ammunition, the rebel battered the Librarian's chest with the butt of the gun. 'Die heretic! D–' Her words were cut short as the chainsword sliced through her waist.

Levi stared at the bloody severed torso. This is not right. It had felt so, so wrong to kill her. Absently he fired his bolter at two men charging him down, felling both. Something exploded a few yards away, throwing Levi backwards. He landed heavily. A stream of damage data ran up his helmet readout but all Levi could see was the woman's face, distorted by rage and hatred.

'Brother, can you hear me?' Levi tried to focus on the distant voice as a pair of armoured arms lifted him to a seated position. Apothecary Mordinian fumbled with Levi's helmet seals and removed the helmet. His lined face cracked into the briefest of smiles. 'Ah, thank Guilliman, you are alive, Brother Librarian. I took your silence for death. A frag grenade ...'

'What? No, I live, as you see.' Levi still felt dazed, unsure whether it was the aftershock of the grenade blast or something else. 'How do we fare?'

'Well, Librarian, well. We must have accounted for over three hundred of the rebels.' He examined Levi as he spoke. 'The Second has regrouped over there, and we await the order to – ah, you are wounded.' Levi became dimly aware of a discomfort in his right leg as the

Apothecary dressed the wound. He put the pain out of his mind as easily as if it was any other emotion. The Apothecary helped him to his feet. 'A few minutes and the dressing will begin to— Oh, I must tend to another. Go well, Brother.'

As the Apothecary hurried away, Levi replaced his helmet before taking in the scene around him for the first time. Black Consuls of the first to sixth squads of the Third Company were coming together, within a few hundred metres of the city walls, a black and yellow armoured mass in a sea of torn and bloody rebel dead. He caught sight of Aeorum. The Standard Bearer was making his way over to him, pausing now and again to speak a few words to squad members. Levi checked his viewscreen reports before watching the fifth squad's Sergeant reverently touching the edge of the standard before turning to muster his men.

'Brother Aeorum, your inspiration gives us all courage. The Second Company holds its position but the Fourth is beleaguered.'

'Yes, I saw the reports.' Aeorum glanced over his shoulder. 'We move to hold the breach soon. Brother Estrus awaits the word from Captain Vanem of the Fourth. Yet you seem... distracted, Brother.'

'Chaos so twists these rebels that they accuse us of heresy, of being servants of Chaos.' Something close. The thought intruded abruptly.

'I heard their blaspheming too,' Aeorum shrugged. 'But we must hold true and must not be swayed.'

Close. Aeorum's voice faded as Levi felt a large presence looming. He fought to pinpoint it. The clamour of human minds, beyond the rise towards the city walls. He opened a channel on his helmet-com. 'Brother Captain, we are coming under attack, one hundred metres due north-west. A large force, repeat, a large force.'

'Acknowledged, Brother.' The rest of Captain Estrus's reply was drowned out by a booming barrage of bolters as the Black Consuls opened fire on the seething mass of rebels appearing over the rise. Aeorum raced to join the first squad, firing with deadly accuracy as he

closed with the attackers. As the standard moved through their midst, a great roar rose from the ranks of the Black Consuls. Levi, powering up his chainsword, began to follow. The air was suddenly alive with sheets of electricity. Levi's helmet visors darkened instantly. Teleport! Raw discharges of energy crackled wildly as a new presence materialised amongst the rebels.

It seemed to Levi as if a gateway to his darkest nightmares had opened up on Suracto. A squad of Space Marines had materialised in the midst of the rebel force, but to call them by that name would be a blasphemy. Their archaic armour sported all manner of grisly and morbid decorations, borne of Chaos-twisted imaginations and depraved urges: belts made of skulls hung around one waist, a rotting long-haired scalp adorned another's helmet, razor-sharp spikes encrusted most shoulder pads. But on every suit of ancient armour there was a common symbol, the hateful many-headed Hydra of the Alpha Legion. It was worse than even the Inquisitor had suspected. The accursed rebels were under the sway of these foul Chaos renegades.

Levi and his brother Black Consuls took all this in at a glance before turning their firepower on the new arrivals. A deadly hail of bolter shells rained on the Alpha Legionaries but though the human rebels around them were ripped to shreds, only two of the Chaos Space Marines fell before they opened fire with their own weapons. The crest of the rise was consumed in primeval savagery as the Black Consuls vented their long-suppressed anger on the twisted representations of the Emperor's warriors that stood before them.

Levi hacked his way towards the Alpha Legion squad, a cold hatred coursing through his veins. He barely gave a second thought to the rebels he despatched to the Emperor's mercies... until the slow, terrifying realisation dawned upon him. The rebels were turning away from the Black Consuls and were also training their weapons on the Legionaries. Soon, both Black Consul and

rebel alike were fighting a common enemy, the Alpha Legion. Levi tried to ignore his confusion as he fought to get closer to the middle of the fray but abruptly the fighting stopped. Only the rebels and the Black Consuls still stood.

Estrus stood amidst the carnage, a dying Alpha Legionary at his feet. The foul warrior's chestplate had been torn open, exposing a tangled mess of charred flesh and ruined machinery. His hand twitched. Estrus calmly pointed his bolt pistol at the armoured head. As the shot rang out, Levi reached his Captain's side. He looked at the grisly remains of the Legionary's head, made waste by the bolter shell.

'Captain, we have been misled.' Levi looked around, at the drawn, sallow faces of the rebels, at the Black Consuls, already beginning to round up the ragged bands, their anger spent. The harsh noise of battle sounded from beyond the city walls. 'Brother Captain, the rebel prisoners—'

Estrus raised a hand. 'I hear you, Librarian. And I understand. We have been made unwitting pawns in a dark and disturbing game. I must signal the Fourth. I fear that Planetary Lord Koln's forces may be a graver danger to them than the rebels.' He signalled to a nearby Space Marine. 'Brother Sergeant, give me a casualty report and find me a representative from these rebels that I can speak to.'

'This is treachery!' Levi and Estrus span to see Administrator Niall striding towards them. The Administrator flapped a hand at the stunned rebel force. 'They must be executed, every last man and woman. You heard what the Inquisitor said!' His voice cracked as he shrieked the words.

Estrus's helmeted head turned smoothly towards the Administrator. 'You saw for yourself what happened here, Administrator Niall?' Niall hesitated, then nodded briefly. 'Then you know the scourge of Chaos is upon your planet—'

'But can't you see what's going on?' Niall interrupted, exasperated. 'The rebels have conspired with the Alpha Legion—'

'But the Chaos Legionaries fought rebel and Consul alike,' interrupted Levi.

'Yes, that's what I meant. I...' Niall rubbed a hand across his face.

He seemed older, somehow, thought Levi.

'You know your Codex, Space Marine,' said Niall. '*All those who stand with Chaos must be shown the Emperor's mercies.*'

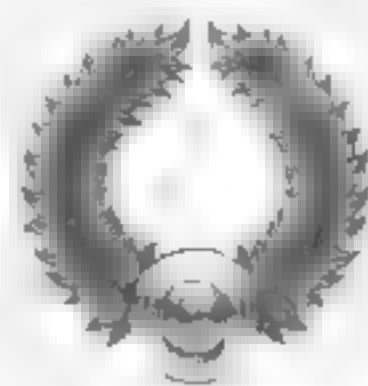
'*All those who stand by Chaos must be given the opportunity to seek the Emperor's light or be shown the just and swift mercies of those who do His work.* That is what the Codex says.' So saying, Levi strode nearer to the Administrator. Visibly shaken, Niall backed off a few paces. 'Administrator, how is it that you have knowledge of our blessed Book?'

'It is simply something that I heard...' Niall backed further away, his voice faltering. 'Your duty is clear. You, you must—' The left side of Niall's head erupted outwards in a shower of blood and tissue.

The rebel holstered his autopistol and spat on the Administrator's still-twitching body. 'I am Mitago,' he said, his sunken eyes burning in his ashen, unshaven face. 'I am the leader of this detachment of my people. And I have heard enough lies and cant from this verminous servant of Chaos.'

As the rebel leader hurried over to talk further with Captain Estrus, Levi looked down on Administrator Niall's corpse and mused on another verse of the Codex. Swift unthinking justice profits you nothing. It shall bring only misery and the tears of the wronged.

He went to find Aeorum.



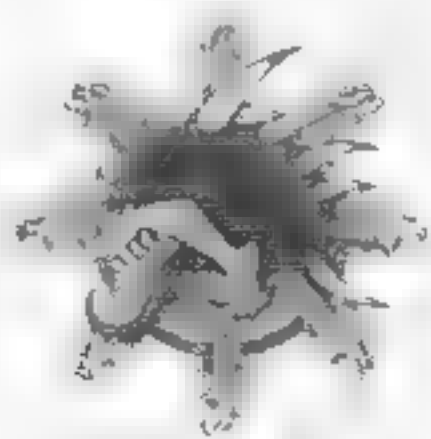
AS THE THIRD Company approached the city walls, a cold and grim determination had descended upon the Black Consuls. The fourth squad had been lost completely, and but two men remained of the sixth. The loss weighed heavily on their surviving brother

Consuls. Mitago, whose men now brought up the rear behind the Company's Rhinos, had revealed the unthinkable truth.

'We had endured enough,' he had told Estrus. 'Koln simply asked too much. We worked hard, filled with a joyful love for the Emperor. But Koln would make speeches demanding more, telling us that the Imperium would be angry if we did not increase our planetary tithe.'

Then, he said, the purges began. Loyal citizens disappeared as Koln's Arbitrators terrorised the planet. Criminals were executed for any crime, often on nothing more than an Arbitrator's whim. 'Heresy' was found everywhere, heretics were rooted out of every house and home. 'And we knew it was wrong,' continued Mitago. 'The Emperor's law is hard, but in its harshness it is just. There was no justice left on Suracto and in our hearts, we knew that Koln was not doing the Emperor's work. It left us no choice.' He indicated the dead Alpha Legionaries. 'We had no idea that the taint on his soul was this abominable.'

Mitago's words had stunned the listening Black Consuls into silence. Each one knew what the implications were, but Levi knew that each Space Marine would be true to his training and his order: there would be no regrets, no accusations, no guilt. They had done nothing other than follow the Codex, however misguidedly. With their customary discipline and self control, they would shift their attention to the true enemy, and the Blessed Book would surely guide them along the path of righteousness.



ALL SUCH THOUGHTS quickly faded as the Third Company approached Thuram City. The Second Company had lost over thirty men and their armoured vehicles had borne the brunt of

rebel artillery before their own Whirlwinds had eliminated that threat. Both Captains had agreed that the Second should remain where they were to protect against any threat from outside the city.

Levi had joined Aeorum and the first squad as they crossed the field of rubble which marked where the city wall had been. Months of fighting had made jagged, burnt-out skeletons of the city's fine architecture. Hundreds of bodies lay strewn, blackened, bloodied and forgotten, along the pockmarked streets.

'They've made their own pretty hell here,' muttered Aeorum, as they advanced up Thuram's Main Avenue, the valley floor of a blasted concrete canyon that stretched upwards to a sliver of skyline nearly a kilometre above.

Levi merely nodded silently as he listened to the reports that streamed in. Things changed dramatically with each passing minute. Captain Estrus had signalled to Captain Vanem of the Fourth Company, who had made efforts to contact the rebels' leaders. They in turn had spoken to Vanem and had welcomed the new understanding – but not so the till-now loyal forces opposed to the rebellion. As soon as they had heard what was going on, they had turned on the Fourth Company.

As Levi calmly took in all that was happening, he realised that he had not seen Inquisitor Parax since the prisoners' interrogation. Parax's over-zealous fanaticism meant that he had his own part in this foul heresy that had entrapped them all. Were it not for the seal of the Inquisition, Levi would have suspected a darker motive for Parax's actions, Codex forgive the thought–

Levi's train of thought was shattered as they drew near to a scene of horrific carnage. Hundreds of rebels and Suractan loyalist forces clashed in a sprawling street skirmish; the Fourth Company, an uneasy presence between both sides, fought stoically against the red-uniformed Suractans, but were being hampered by the berserk zeal of the rebels. Unarmed rebels leapt over their dead comrades to tear at the Suractans' faces with their bare hands.

‘Emperor preserve us!’ Estrus barked. ‘We must restore some order here!’ He bellowed some orders and his squads went smoothly into action. The first and second squads broke off to attack a detachment of Suractan autoriflemen. Dozens of red uniforms were mown down as the Consuls’ bolters took their toll. Levi felled two men with a single chainsword stroke as all around him, Consuls fought with a refreshed, vigorous spirit. This was more than battle. This was atonement.

‘Librarian, they retreat!’ At Aerom’s call, Levi looked over his shoulder to see several dozen Suractans breaking away.

‘Second squad, hold!’ ordered Levi. ‘First squad, Standard Bearer, with me!’ The first squad broke away in pursuit. A dark shape in his mind’s eye. The vision disappeared from Levi’s mind, but its meaning was clear enough. ‘First squad, slow down. We must be vigilant.’ The Consuls obediently slowed to a walk, the Suractans retreating from view. Advancing through the twilit streets, Levi notice a change in the architecture around him. He turned to the Sergeant. ‘Brother, where are we?’

There was a pause as the Sergeant searched for the right information. ‘In Planetary Lord Koln’s palace complex, Brother Librarian.’

‘Then we have another purpose here,’ said Levi. ‘Squad, halt!’

Aeorum approached Levi. ‘We have lost the loyalists. What’s your plan, Brother?’

Levi gave no answer but bowed his head as he sent his mind out into the dark buildings beyond. A dark cancerous presence remained. They had not left. ‘The Alpha Legion are still here.’ A murmur ran through the Space Marines at the Codicier’s words and grips tightened instinctively around weapons. Levi focused on the presence, found a direction. ‘This way, my Brothers.’

The Consuls made their way, in silence save for the whirring of servo-motors and the echoes of their footsteps, into the labyrinth of corridors that ran within Koln’s palace, allowing themselves to be guided by the Codicier’s psychic powers.

Levi felt an icy rage rising within him, the rage he had felt when he first saw the Alpha Legionaries. He strove to control his feelings, even though he knew that his brother consuls must also be feeling the same anger. He felt the presence of Chaos draw near: nothing must now dull his purpose.

‘Librarian! Your arrival is timely.’

Levi signalled to his brother Marines to lower their weapons as Inquisitor Parax emerged from the shadows, accompanied by his ever-present retinue. ‘What are you doing here?’ asked Levi, uncomfortable that he had not sensed the Inquisitor’s presence.

‘I fear that Lord Koln is held hostage by the Alpha Legion.’

‘Hostage?’ Levi asked. ‘But Koln is himself a servant of Chaos.’

‘Not so, Librarian—’

‘Brother Librarian, shuttle craft powering up.’ The Sergeant checked his scanners. ‘Two hundred metres north east.’

Levi glanced at his own readouts. ‘I see it. First squad, Standard Bearer, with me. Inquisitor, do not impede us.’ Parax nodded and allowed the Black Consuls to pass. The Space Marines broke into a run, armoured feet pounding the floor as they strove to cover the distance. Levi checked his scans again: shuttle craft preparing for lift-off, twenty metres and closing.

The tunnels opened into a landing bay. The high-pitched whine of the shuttle craft’s engines, bearing the Suractan standard, filled the cavernous room. At the foot of the shuttle’s entry gantry a red-cloaked human argued vehemently with the two Alpha Legionaries that loomed over him. As Levi took aim with his bolter one of the Legionaries lifted his hand and placed a large gun against the human’s head. The plasma pistol flashed and the human was torn apart by a glowing ball of super-heated flame.

The Legionary seemed to look at the Black Consuls for an infinity. You have failed, Consul. Levi heard the words clearly over the clamour of the squad’s firing. Aeorum had already covered half the distance between the entrance and

the shuttle but the Legionaries turned and fled up the gantry, the shuttle already lifting off the ground.

'Get down!' Levi shoulder-charged the Standard Bearer, throwing him to the floor, pinning him down as a white-hot stream of plasma poured from the shuttle's engines, incinerating the spot where Aeorum had been a second earlier. Helmet screens darkened as the landing bay was bathed in a brilliant light. With a thunderclap the shuttle took off.

Levi got to his feet. 'Brother Sergeant, contact the Chapter Ship. That shuttle must be intercepted!' He glanced at the faint human outline scorched into the landing bay's floor as Inquisitor Parax strode over. His psychic discomfort was reaching the level of pain. 'Lord Koln?' he asked the Inquisitor.

The Inquisitor nodded. 'Yes. Another dupe in this foul Chaos plot.' He paused, staring at the remains of the Planetary Lord. 'This is a grave matter, Consul. When heresy runs this deep, it must remain a matter for the Inquisition.'

'But what if this has happened on other planets, in other systems?' Aeorum asked, removing his helmet. 'The Codex binds us, we must seek out such heresy.'

'We cannot smoke them out too early,' said Parax. 'Swift unthinking justice shall profit you nothing, Consul.'

'Too... too early?' Levi asked, unnerved by the Inquisitor's use of that particular Codex verse. He gave himself a moment to collect his thoughts, checking a report. The shuttle had outrun the Chapter Ship and jumped into the Warp on Suracto's dark side. 'Do you have evidence of other plots like this?'

Parax glared at the Librarian. 'As I said, Librarian, this is a matter for the Inquisition. Cross me at your peril.' Parax spun on his heels and walked away. Levi started to follow when an armoured hand came to rest on his shoulder. The Librarian turned to face Aeorum. He released his helmet and looked around at his fellow Consuls, methodically checking and securing the landing bay.

'Brother Levi, we have done all we can. For now.' Aeorum indicated Koln's final

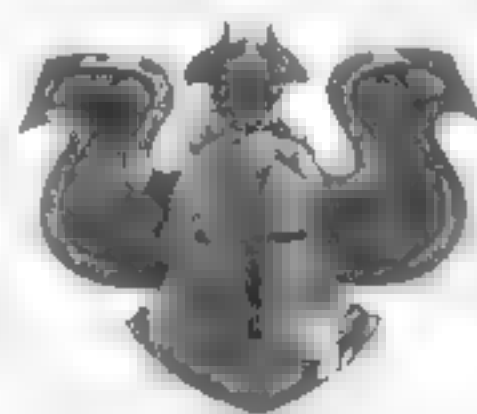
resting place. 'It does seem that Koln may have been tricked, as we were. It may be the time for you to let the Inquisition do what it does best. We have freed Suracto, which is prize enough. And Captain Estrus will require a full report.' Aeorum gave a half-hearted smile.

'The Codex tells us to be vigilant, to actively seek out all manifestations of Chaos, wherever they may be. As Codicier of the Imperial Order of Black Consuls, it is my solemn duty.' Levi looked up at the standard in his brother Consul's hand. 'I am not best pleased at this decision.' He sighed, conceding. 'But you may be right. We have done all we can, for now.'

As he made ready to signal Captain Estrus, Codicier Levi remembered the verse he had read that morning.

And those dedicated to the Emperor's work will be beset upon all sides by enemies. Be vigilant for they are everywhere and you may depend on none but your Brothers in arms to carry out His blessed work.

Levi signalled the Captain.



AS THE DOOR of his cabin aboard the Inquisition ship closed silently behind him, Parax wearily began to take off his armour. This time, he had narrowly succeeded in doing his master's work, though he was long used to the arduous nature of his blessed task. But if the extent to which Chaos had pervaded Suracto were to have become more widely known ... He sighed as he put his armour away. Perhaps the Exterminatus would have been his only remaining option.

He reached for his robe. For now, the Black Consuls had played their part, and order had been restored. The other planets in the system were safe. Absently, he rubbed the many-headed Hydra tattoo on the inside of his forearm. Their time was yet to come. ●

“...and on that day, Chranos, Daemon of Chaos, drank deep of the decadent souls of Loren, for none could stand before him...”



OBVIOUS TACTICS!
Episode Five

DEEP BELOW THE CITY, THE *BLOOD ANGELS* MEET STRONG
RESISTANCE FROM THE FEARSOME *DEATH GUARD*.









Dark Heart

by
Jonathan Green

THE WOLVES are running again. I can hear them panting in the darkness. I race through the forest and the night, trying to outpace them. The trees seem to throw themselves in front of me to slow my progress. Leafless branches reach for me as I crash on.

Behind the wolves I sense another presence, something evil. It follows my flight with menacing eyes. I feel a cold chill take hold of my heart. With every heartbeat the wolves are getting closer. There is nothing I can do to escape.

And then, in time with my pounding pulse, I hear the beating of wings. Strong, slow gusts of frigid air caress my body. With every beat I feel their power increasing. Great black wings close around me, their leathery warmth shrouding me from the numbing darkness. The sickly sweet smell of blood fills my nostrils. I cannot help but breathe in great lungfuls of the rank air. The wings enclose me totally, suffocating me. Even through the darkness I can see the red veins pulsing.

Blood flows in the endless night. It surrounds me, rising ever higher. Or is it I who is sinking deeper?

Then I am drowning. I gasp for air but instead the hot life-fluid pours into my parched throat. Its viscous sweetness cloyes in my mouth. I cannot help but swallow. As I do so my senses are flooded with feelings of darkest ecstasy.

I am in the place of blood again.

AND I SAY we stick to the plan, just for once, and keep on to Ostermark!' The slim man's sharp eyes glared at the rest of the band from under a fringe of unkempt black hair.

Torben Badenov scratched his neatly-trimmed black beard. The tallest of the mercenaries, his hefty frame making him an imposing figure, could see that the disgruntled Yuri was in one of his stubborn moods.

Oran Scarfen looked up from polishing a dagger. 'Oh you do, do you?' he retorted.

The mercenary band was gathered before a signpost at a t-junction in the road over the moors. Shivering, they pulled their furs tighter around them against the chill of approaching night. They were all dressed in a similar fashion with tough, leather boots and they still wore their thick winter cloaks. With their assortment of swords and axes they were the very picture of hard-bitten fighting men.

'It's almost dusk,' Alexi, the leather-armoured old soldier from Nuln pointed out as he finished rearranging his backpack. 'We ought to start looking for somewhere to stay for the night.'

Yuri pointed an accusing finger at a smartly dressed, black-robed Kislevite. The man's left eye was covered by a patch that made him look both distinguished and mysterious. 'Well if Krakov here hadn't've got falling-down drunk—'

'As usual!' snorted the weaselly Oran.

'— and let the damn horses wander off, we wouldn't be in this mess.'

'That's right. We would've been in Ostermark by now,' agreed Stanislav, a heavily-built mercenary, his ham-sized hands resting firmly on his hips.

Torben paused in cleaning his blade and turned his gaze on the cringing Kislevite. Krakov's face was scarlet, and he was staring at the ground with embarrassment as he shifted guiltily from one foot to the other.

'We could've been enjoying the hospitality of the Slaughtered Troll by now,' Stanislav, the great bear of a man continued, a dreamy look in his eyes. 'I would've drunk old Alexi under the table—'

'As usual,' Oran muttered.

'— and Serena would be sitting on my lap right now, saying how much she loves me.'

'Like she does any fool who's more generous than he is sober,' Torben laughed.

Stanislav scowled at the band's raven-haired leader, but not for long. His broad face broke into a grin. 'That's my Serena, and it does a man's heart good to hear it.'

'But we're not in Ostermark!' Yuri sulked.

'We should head for this place, Ostenwald,' Alexi suggested. 'It's only five miles away.'

'I agree,' Oran stated firmly.

Torben looked up at the signpost again. It was the only man-made object in sight on the blasted heath. The main body of the sign was a sturdy stake hammered firmly into the ground with an arrowed board pointing towards the east, carved with the name 'Ostermark'. The letters had then been picked out in red to make them stand out further. Pointing in the opposite direction was a much smaller, age-weathered sign, no doubt a remnant of a previous signpost. The faded lettering, once painted with an unsteady hand, read 'OSTENWALD, 5 MILES'.

'I thought we were looking for work, especially since Krakov lost our horses,' Yuri complained. 'We should head for Ostermark!'

'Yuri's right,' Torben declared, sheathing his sword. 'The village may be closer but look at the sign: it's tiny. I've seen bigger signs on privy doors. I bet this Ostenwald isn't much more than a few hovels and a hen house. There probably isn't even a tavern!' He was in full flow now, gesticulating expansively. 'No, there won't be any work for us there. Ostermark it is. We'll press on for a couple of hours, camp by the roadside for the night, and be there in the morning.'

Dusk was drawing on, the last lingering rays of the sun giving way to twilight, as the party set off along the eastern road.



THEY HAD BARELY been on the road for ten minutes when the thunder of hooves approached on the road behind him. Torben turned, along with the rest of the band, and at once saw the carriage speeding through the grey twilight towards them. As one, the mercenaries threw themselves out of the way, landing in the dirt at the side of the road.

Torben looked over his shoulder as the vehicle bumped past them. Plush red velvet drapes flapped from the windows of the black carriage. A family crest picked out in gold on its side also attested to the fact that its owner was someone of noble background and with, no doubt, the riches to match.

The silhouettes of two figures could be seen in the driver's seat at the front of the careering vehicle. The coachman lay slumped at the reins: Torben assumed he was dead. Next to the body, a young woman was struggling to control the racing horses but without success. The carriage was out of control.

In seconds Torben was up and running after the carriage. As he drew level with the vehicle, Torben grabbed hold, leaped and swung himself up into the driver's seat next to the young woman. Gasping with her exertions, she shot him a wild-eyed look.

'If you'll allow me, my lady,' the mercenary said, flashing the terrified woman a smile, and gently took the reins from her. Coaxing words to the horses from the mercenary captain were accompanied by a firm hand on the reins.

By now Stanislav and Yuri were running alongside the horses, the creatures' bridles in their hands. In only a few moments the frightened animals had slowed to a trot, and then came to a halt. The carriage came to rest behind them.

Torben turned again towards the young woman. His eyes widened as his gaze progressed upwards from her delicate ankles and the gold-braided hem of her blue velvet dress. Her features were delicately set within the slender frame of

her face. A stray tress of auburn hair caressed a pale cheek. Anxious emerald green eyes peered back at him from beneath the hood of her travelling cloak.

Her dress was of the latest cut and made from the finest materials. A silver brooch, inlaid with gemstones, held her cloak in place. All these things, along with the opulence of the carriage and the quality of the horses, no farmyard nags, spoke to Torben with money's voice.

'They killed my driver!' she blurted out, having recovered her breath.

'Who did?' asked Torben, startled by her outburst.

'The villagers. Oh, please help me!' she gasped.

'You are safe now,' Stanislav said, trying to reassure the girl.

'I— I wish it were that simple,' she said with unashamed despair.

'What is it? What's the matter?' Torben pressed.

'I must get to Ostermark! I must petition Lord Gunther for his help!' Her voice carried a vehemence Torben would not have expected from this waif-like girl. 'A terrible evil has arisen in my village.'

'Ostenwald, you mean?' Krakov asked.

'The same,' she nodded. 'I know you will probably find this hard to believe... but the dead have risen from their graves!'

'Oh, I don't know. We've seen a few strange things ourselves,' Torben said by way of encouragement.

'Those who have not already fled are now under a foul curse! I flee for my life, for they chase me even now!' The young woman peered anxiously back over her shoulder, before continuing. 'I must get help! I just hope that the fortune my late father left will be enough to persuade Lord Gunther to put an end to this evil. As commander of the militia he will be able to send armed men to stop them. He will surely help after all the years he served with my father in the Elector Count's cavalry!'

The girl looked exhausted through fear and anxiety. Torben took her cold, trembling hands in his. 'Do not worry,' he said, reassuringly. 'We will help you on your way.' The mercenary jumped down from the carriage, pushing the coachman's body before him, and placed a firm hand

on the black-robed Kislevite's shoulder. 'Krakov, make up for losing our mounts by driving... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name,' he said, looking up at the woman with a smile.

She looked down shyly. 'I am the Lady Isolde.'

'By driving the Lady Isolde to the city.'

The one-eyed Krakov needed no more encouragement and clambered up into the driver's seat. Torben supposed that he was pleased to be getting a lift to Ostermark ahead of the rest of them; no doubt the thought of a rest from the endless ribbing had also entered his mind.

'Let's see if you can keep hold of these horses: after all, at least these are tied to the carriage. We'll see you in the Slaughtered Troll tomorrow, at noon.'

The mercenary captain was suddenly aware of shouts in the distance. Peering through the dusky gloom, Torben could make out a crowd of peasants charging towards them from the direction of Ostenwald. Their hair was lank and matted, while their clothes were caked with mud. The crazed mob was howling rabidly and the mercenary could just make out gruff shouts of, 'Stop her! She has to die!' They were waving an assortment of axes, clubs and farm implements above their heads; others carried blazing torches.

'It's them!' the Lady Isolde screamed, looking back in horror at the approaching crowd. 'You must kill them!'

Having caught sight of the mercenaries, the villagers appeared to become even more enraged, the front-runners putting on a burst of speed.

'Don't worry, we'll deal with them,' Torben said coolly. 'Go — now!'

With a loud cry, Krakov whipped the horses into a gallop and without another word the carriage sped away towards Ostermark.

'I don't think they're going to be open to the idea of civilised discussion,' Alexi said, unslinging his bow from his shoulder as he eyed the dishevelled villagers.

'Well there's five of us,' Yuri said, notching an arrow to his own bow, 'and—'

'—lots of them,' Stanislav finished.

'So let's even up the odds,' Torben smiled, taking aim along a flighted shaft.

‘When you’re ready, lads!’

Five black shafts shot across the dimming sky. Four of the mob’s leaders stumbled and fell, and remained still.

‘Never mind, Oran,’ Torben chuckled as the fifth arrow embedded itself in the road. ‘Better luck next time, eh?’

The rat-faced man cursed under his breath. ‘Never did like long-ranged weapons,’ he muttered. ‘A dagger, up close. That’s more my style.’

The deaths of their fellows did nothing to halt the rampaging crowd but merely seemed to spur the men on, if men they were. From their bedraggled appearance Torben could almost believe that they were nothing more than the dead risen from their graves!

‘And again!’ Torben called over the furious shouts of the lynch-mob. A second volley of arrows soared through the air and found their mark in the seething crowd.

Then the villagers were upon them. The mercenary band just had time to drop their bows and unsheathe their weapons. The battle lasted only a few minutes. In a series of well-practised strokes, the trained soldiers despatched the crazed thugs. Placing a foot against a man’s chest, Torben pulled his sword free of his last opponent’s body. The man fell spread-eagled onto the road, the sharpened fence-post he was using as a club rolling from his hand. The mercenary looked around for another opponent but there was none.

‘Well, that was kind of easy,’ Stanislav stated.

‘Nothing to it for fighting men like us,’ Torben boasted.

‘So maybe there was something to her ladyship’s story after all,’ Yuri pondered.

‘Maybe there was,’ Torben agreed. And yet at the back of his mind he couldn’t help thinking that the villagers hadn’t really behaved as if driven by dark sorcery. They had still cried out in pain like the living.

‘She said she needed help,’ Yuri reminded his companions.

‘And she mentioned a family fortune!’ Stanislav added.

Torben stroked his beard with a large, rough hand for a moment. ‘Tell you what,’ he said, finally, ‘why don’t we go and sort out whatever’s going on in Ostenwald.

Then Lady Isolde will reward us, instead of this lord that she’s gone to petition.’

All but one of the others smiled and nodded in agreement. Torben looked at them, grinning broadly at his own cunning suggestion.

‘I told you we should’ve headed for the village,’ Oran muttered under his breath.

I AM RUNNING again. Branches whip across my face. Sharp twigs, like a crone’s fingernails, tear my skin. I can no longer hear the wolves behind me.

I burst free of the tangled wood and stop. A menacing shadow looms up tall out of the darkness. I am standing at the foot of a grey, stone tower. Against the pall of night, small black shapes flit around its ruined turrets.

And then I am flying with the bats. My wings beat against the night as I circle the tower in a jerky spiral. Beneath me the crumbling walls taper as they stretch towards the ground. The moon hangs waning in the sky, seemingly only wing-beats away. Its chill light illuminates an arched window near the top of the tower, and from within the opening a figure watches me. Cruel eyes stare out of a face as cold and white as the moon. Their gaze pierces my soul. I recognise the face. It is a face that has haunted my dreams for an eternity. It is my own.

THE WHETSTONE scraped along the edge of the blade, and off the end with a deep ringing sound. The flickering firelight picked out the noble, yet haggard, features that gave the young man an appearance beyond his years. He paused in his preparations and looked up at the moon. ‘It is almost time, Walter,’ he stated with finality.

‘Aye,’ the ageing manservant replied. ‘Tonight the beast will finally die.’

Pieter’s eyes glazed over as he remembered for the hundredth time the events of the last seven days.

A week ago he had been a different man, care-free and full of youthful optimism, firm in the knowledge that he loved another with a passion and was loved in return in equal measure. Now he was a shell of his former self, dedicated to one purpose only and his actions fuelled by his

desire for vengeance. How he longed for those carefree days of youth that now seemed years ago.

But it had been only seven nights since Pieter Valburg, only son of the Mayor of Schwertdorf, had returned from the wars to find his beloved Rosamund on her death-bed. They had known each other since childhood, Rosamund's father being the Lord of Grunwald, only ten miles from Pieter's own home. It was no secret that their families had always planned that they should marry but over the years a youthful friendship had grown into deeply-felt love. The union of the houses of Valburg and Reichter would go ahead to the delight of all, founded on true love and with no sham of affection.

But then the Elector of Ostermark had called on the services of brave young men throughout the province to defend against the incursions of Orcs and Goblins from within the Great Forest. Pieter himself was called up and he rode away to war with equal measures of anticipation, for what was to come, and sorrow, at having to leave his dear Rosamund. But he knew that he would eventually return bringing glory and honour to his family.

Indeed, in time, the Battle of Riesenbad was won. Pieter returned home at a gallop and made straight for Grunwald. The first signs of Spring were visible in the land and the sun was shining. However, upon his triumphant arrival at Lord Reichter's house Pieter was greeted with the most tragic news. While he had been away fighting, his betrothed had been taken seriously ill by what the family physician described as a 'disease of the blood'. Rushing to her chamber he had found Rosamund a pale, wasted shell of the woman he had left only a few months before. That night he kept vigil by her bedside, but overcome by tiredness after his long journey he finally, if unwillingly, gave in to sleep.

He had been woken as the clocks chimed midnight to see a shadow slip from the room through the open window. He looked immediately to his betrothed only to find her already dead.

The black veil of mourning was drawn over the household and at the physician's urging Rosamund was buried the very next day. But during the very next night her grave had been disturbed, by wolves the

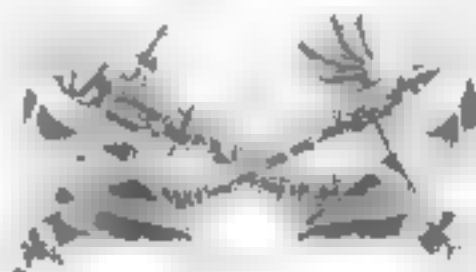
gravedigger had said, and her body taken. For most that was the end of it, but Pieter knew better. On his return to his family home, Walter, his family's oldest and most loyal retainer had taken him aside and told him the legend of Count Morderischen.

It was said that during his evil lifetime there were no depths of depravity to which the lord of Ostenwald Tower would not sink. He was even accused of stealing and eating babies from the local villages. A hundred years ago the bloodthirsty count had been put to death by the enraged peasants and imprisoned inside the Morderischen family tomb. The village of Ostenwald lay only a league away and to Walter it was clear what had happened. Somehow the monster had returned from the dead and taken Rosamund.

Other people told Pieter not to listen, dismissing Walter as a superstitious old fool. But in his grief Pieter was prepared to accept any story, no matter how outlandish. He had always thought himself a rational man but his anguish needed an outlet. If there was any chance that what Walter told him was true he had to follow it up – he had to go to Ostenwald.

'All is ready,' Walter said, carefully placing another sharpened whitethorn stake on the ground next to the fire.

'Tonight my love will be avenged,' Pieter said. It was not a point to be debated. Placing the whetstone against the gleaming edge of his grandfather's sword he resumed sharpening.



TORBEN STOPPED at the cross-roads around which Ostenwald huddled and looked around. Before him was a patch of dying grass that he assumed was the village green. The eaves of the low buildings were picked out by the silvery light of the rising moon. A number of miserable-looking women and children returned his gaze before doors and shutters daubed with sacred symbols were slammed shut and locked.

'Friendly lot round here, aren't they?' Oran said sullenly.

'We should pity these people, not mock them,' Alexi said and Stanislav grunted his own disapproval.

Torben had seen places like this on many occasions. They were in a run-down village inhabited by a fearful populace, who dared not venture out after dark.

'There's something wrong here,' Yuri said quietly.

'Oh, you noticed,' Oran sneered.

Ignoring the bickering of the others Torben continued his survey of the village. Overlooking it, atop a wooded hill, the pinnacle of a ruined and overgrown tower pointed into the night's sky like a twisted finger. Torben looked from one mercenary to the next.

'Come on, let's not waste any time where we're not welcome,' he said gruffly. 'Her ladyship said the dead have risen. To the cemetery!'



THE MOON'S COLD, unwelcoming light cast eerie shadows among the tombs and gravestones as the mercenary band advanced through the cemetery. 'I don't mind telling you, I do not like this,' Oran carped to anyone who might be listening

Yuri froze. 'What was that?' he hissed.

'What was what?' asked Stanislav.

'I heard something. A skittering sound, like the shifting of loose soil.' His words slowed as he realised what he was saying.

Torben turned. 'Hush, you fools!' he hissed. 'There's nothing th-

The mercenary captain heard the snap of a twig behind him and spun round, half expecting to come face-to-face with the living dead. But looking back at him were the steely eyes of a stern-faced, smartly-dressed young man, almost a head shorter than Torben and still very much alive. He had a finely-honed sword gripped in one hand, pointing at Torben chest. Behind him stood a hunched and balding old man, stiff in his formal servant's attire.

'Who are you and what are you doing here?' the young man hissed.

Torben smiled broadly, keeping a close eye on the gleaming blade. 'My name is Torben Badenov and these are my companions. Our business is our affair. I could ask the same of you.'

'I am Pieter Valburg. My reason for being here is an honourable one.' Torben raised an eyebrow. 'I have come to avenge the death of my beloved.'

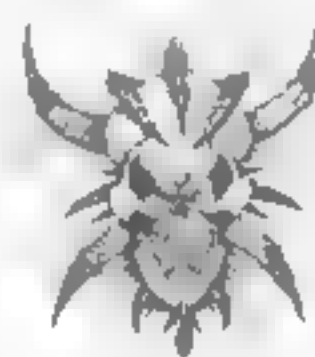
'In a graveyard?' Oran burst out incredulously. 'Who killed your sweetheart?'

'The Vampire who is buried here,' the old man stated coldly.

'A Vampire? What makes you so sure?' Torben said.

Pieter began to explain: 'Walter, my retainer, says—'

'This old man? What does he know?' Torben declaimed, gently lowering Pieter's blade with his hand. 'We too have come to sort out what's going on here but I'm sure it has nothing to do with the living dead! We should talk.'



THIS IS IT: the Morderischen family tomb,' Walter said sombrely, nodding at the grim edifice before which the seven of them now stood. Grotesque gargoyles leered down from the edge of the circle of light cast by the old manservant's lantern. Beyond the rusted railings and chained iron gates, stone steps led downwards into darkness.

'So this is where your Vampire is supposed to reside.' Torben took in the carved skulls that reminded the observer of the ever-present certainty of death.

'Homely, isn't it.' A hint of uncertainty tinged Oran's usual sarcastic tone.

'The legend goes that one hundred years ago a priest of Sigmar, assisted by a band of noble adventurers, defeated the evil creature who dwelt in that tower over there on the hill,' Walter explained.

Torben again looked towards the grim structure, now overgrown with thorns. Its silhouette stood black against the deep blue of night.

'The victorious priest imprisoned the count in the tomb of his forefathers here,' the old man continued. 'The villagers, in revenge for the murders the monster had perpetrated, wrecked the tower.'

'So why all the trouble now?' Alexi asked.

'It would appear that, after a century, the power of the wardings used to seal the tomb have faded and the horror inside has reawakened.'

'Look at this place!' Yuri exclaimed. 'The gates are locked and rusted up. No one's been in or out of here for years. You're wrong, old man.'

'No, it is here,' the retainer insisted. 'Its kind are not stopped by locks!'

The moon was high in the night's sky and Torben was aware of a disconcerting howling coming from the direction of the wood.

'We cannot delay,' Pieter pressed, anxiously. 'We must enter the tomb.'

Torben tested the chain securing the gates. 'Come on, lads,' he managed to say with forced levity. 'We might as well take a look now we're here. Stanislav, if you would be so kind...'

The bear-like ex-soldier stepped up to the gates, lifting the double-headed axe from his belt. With one effortless swipe the chain was shattered, the sound of the broken links rattling onto cracked flagstones echoing around the silent cemetery. Taking hold of the rusted iron bars Torben tugged on the gates. Metal grated on stone as corroded hinges screeched in protest at being forced to open once more.

The party paused, listening to the echo fade between the gravestones.

'Remember, it shall be I who lands the killing blow,' Pieter insisted. 'I owe it to my Rosamund.'

Torben nodded. Taking a step forward, he peered into the darkness of the crypt.

An angry hiss from behind them made the whole party turn round sharply. By the moon's cold light they could see a figure crouched, cat-like, on the bough of a tree, the wind whistling mournfully through the branches. The man's lank hair waved behind him in the breeze and he appeared to be wearing the ragged clothes of a nobleman. More figures moved among the shadows of the cemetery, emerging from

behind gravestones and tombs. Their various forms of dress revealed them to be men and women from all parts of society.

'What do you want?' Pieter challenged the advancing figures, unable to hide his nervousness.

'We want you,' the nobleman in the tree hissed.

'Our lord must feed,' a young peasant woman hissed. 'He will feast on your life energies.' The girl smiled and Torben saw the first glistening points of fangs breaking through bleeding gums.

'By Sigmar!' Alexi gasped.

At that moment the Vampires attacked. The creatures sprang at the mortals, fingernails raking the air as they tried to tear at the adventurers' throats. Swords were yanked from scabbards and battle was joined.

'Take them while they are still weak!' Walter commanded.

'Weak?' Oran gasped, deflecting a taloned fist with his sword. 'I'd hate to see them when they're feeling stronger!'

Torben counted half a dozen or so among the brood. All had obviously still been young when they died, just as they were young in undeath. Despite that, the Vampires fought with agility and strength increased by a supernatural vitality.

Torben swung his sword at the inhuman noble. The stroke opened a great gash across the Vampire's chest through his shirt. The man stumbled backwards at the blow and collapsed over a gravestone.

'One down,' the mercenary said to himself with a grin, and span to face the other creatures.

Torben suddenly found himself hurled bodily to the ground with the hissing nobleman furiously tearing at the mail armour over his jerkin with its talons. Twisting to one side, the warrior used his bulk to throw the clawing Vampire from him. Quickly getting to his feet, he watched open mouthed as the wound he had dealt the man closed bloodlessly before his very eyes.

'By Queen Katarin's sword!' he exclaimed. 'What does it take to stop these things?'

It was all the mercenaries could do to fend off the Vampires' slashing claws. Torben was horrified at how the creatures

caught their blades with bare hands, showing no discomfort whatsoever. And all the while their assailants cursed them.

'The coming of our master is at hand!' a Vampire proclaimed. 'Can you not feel it?'

Torben could almost believe that the wind rose as the words were spoken.

'You will all fall before him,' the peasant girl snarled, 'and he will drain your very lives from you!'

Out of the corner of his eye Torben saw Oran duck as another undead youth launched himself insect-like from a gravestone. Oran sent the Vampire sprawling onto the ground with an up thrust punch from a bony fist. But as soon as the rat-faced mercenary was crouched, with his dagger drawn, the Vampire was also on its feet again, ready to attack.

Stanislav was backed up against the tomb, struggling to fend off a vehement attack from a fanged maiden. Yuri looked up panting, his fringe flopping in front of his eyes. He had blood on his face, although it was not clear whether it was his own or his attacker's.

The peasant girl leapt at Torben. Without hesitation, he parried her outstretched claws with his sword but even this did not stop her. The girl continued to advance, even as her left hand flopped uselessly at her side.

'They won't die!' Yuri yelled as a farm-hand, his body a mass of open wounds, picked himself up once more and continued his assault.

'The beast must be killed!' Walter shouted over the clamour of battle. 'It is the unholy energies which he draws to this place that keeps them alive! If he dies, so will they! Hurry!'

The old manservant darted off, his lantern a bobbing sphere of light vanishing down the steps into the tomb.

'Where does the old fool think he's going?' Torben exclaimed in disbelief.

'We cannot let him go alone!' Pieter shouted back. Evading a blow from his attacker, Pieter followed.

'You go. We'll deal with these,' Oran said, sinking his blade deep into a Vampire's side.

Torben looked towards the tomb. If this was the sort of opposition they could expect to find out here, then down those

stone steps was the last place he wanted to go.



CLEAPING DOWN the steps two at a time, Pieter stumbled to a halt at the bottom, just ahead of the puffing Walter. Pieter took in every detail in the crypt as he realised abruptly that he had at last reached his goal.

They were standing at the edge of a long rectangular chamber which continued beyond stone archways to both left and right. Burnt-out torches rested in sconces around the walls. The reassuring orange glow cast by the lantern illuminated the vaulted ceiling of the crypt, but picking out glowering gargoyles much like those that adorned its exterior. A number of stone coffins lay within the tomb. Several had been smashed open, their lids now so much broken masonry scattering the cracked flag-stoned floor. In the centre of the chamber stood two tombs, grander than the rest. Only one still remained intact. Standing before it was a young woman, beautiful in death as she had been in life, still wearing the white shift in which she had been buried.

'Hello, Pieter.' Her voice was richly seductive.

Pieter stared back at her, open-mouthed. 'Rosamund!'

'I don't believe it, young master,' Walter gasped.

Rosamund's long black hair cascaded down over her shoulders, as luxurious as Pieter had ever seen it. Her ivory skin glowed with an inner vitality and her captivating blue eyes looked back at him longingly. To see his Rosamund alive again, when he had held her cold, frail body against his after her heart had stopped beating, was beyond rational comprehension.

'I've missed you, Pieter. Have you missed me?' Her voice was soft as velvet.

'But... you're dead,' was all he could manage.

'I *was* dead, Pieter, but now I am truly alive,' she said.

'This can't be real,' he spluttered, raising his sword.

'But it is, Pieter. Join me and nothing will ever separate us again.'

'She's no longer your sweetheart, master!' Walter insisted but Pieter only half-heard him. He was gripped by terrified indecision. He could still hardly believe what he was witnessing. The only rational explanation for Rosamund being here now was that she had become like those creatures he had just encountered and yet that in itself was irrational!

'It only takes a kiss,' Rosamund said. 'One kiss and we can be together, forever.'

He began to lower his sword. To be together, that was all he had ever wanted. Pieter stepped slowly forward, gazing into Rosamund's sparkling blue eyes as tears ran from his own. At the edge of his consciousness, he could hear Walter's desperate voice. But with every step the voice became quieter and quieter until he did not notice it at all. All he heard was the soothing voice of his beloved and all he saw was her radiant smile, welcoming him back into her embrace.

And then his mind was awash with a series of confusing images. Walter was between them, a sharpened stake in his hand. And Rosamund no longer had her arms outstretched to embrace him. Instead taloned hands were raised, ready to tear out his throat, while ugly fangs protruded over her sweet cherry lips.

There was a flash of lantern-light and Walter's arm bent down at the elbow at an awkward angle. The old man cried out in pain but his screams became a horrible gurgling as Rosamund's head darted snake-like towards his neck. Walter's body went limp and was flung aside like a rag-doll, landing heavily on top of the unopened coffin. Hissing and spitting the Vampire that had once been his sweet Rosamund moved towards Pieter. Horrified, he looked on, stunned into inaction.

'Wh- what have you done?' he spluttered, aghast. 'Rosamund would never have harmed another creature!'

'That was the old Rosamund,' the creature hissed.

'And you are not her!' Pieter roared, raising his sword.

Rosamund's eyes were suddenly wide open in shock. The Vampire let out a blood-chilling scream as a rusted spear tip burst through her chest, sullyng the white shift with black, half-congealed blood. The broken shaft of the railing had pierced her dead heart. When she stopped twitching, her talons dropped to her side and her eyes closed for the last time. The girl's body slumped to the floor and lay motionless. Torben let go of the broken railing and span about, panting for breath. Pieter was standing completely still, staring fixedly at the corpse of his beloved.

'She was no longer human,' Torben said, his voice full of regret, 'she was a thing. She is at rest now.'

The young man said nothing.

Looking back to the girl's body, Torben saw that she had indeed found the true peace of death at last.

The body of the old retainer lay slumped face-down over the lid of the unopened sarcophagus. A trickle of blood from the dead man's torn throat glinted darkly in the flickering lantern-light. Only half aware of what was happening, Torben watched as the precious, life-giving fluid collected in a small fissure in the coffin lid, then trickled through a crack into the sarcophagus.

SOMETHING STIRS *me, like a voice calling me back to someu here I once knew. In the all-encompassing darkness I feel myself floating upwards. It is as if I am rising from the dark scarlet depths of an ocean. Above me lapping crimson light beckons.*

I can see things beyond the surface. It is as cold as the grave but I can feel the warmth of living bodies close by. I can hear the beating of their warm hearts. I can smell the sweet blood in their veins, hear it pumping through their arteries, taste it in my mouth.

And I know what it is to hunger again.

PIETER WAS SUDDENLY aware of a cold wind blowing through the crypt. Leaves from outside were lifted in spiralling eddies that danced among the tombs. 'We have to finish it,' the young man stated with grim resolution, taking a

whitethorn stake from his pack. Torben Badenov nodded.

Bracing themselves against the lid of the coffin, they pushed with all that remained of their strength. With a hollow grating noise, the stone lid slid slowly across the top of the granite sarcophagus. Pieter winced and turned away gasping as stale air, heavy with the stench of decay, escaped from the coffin along with a wisp of red mist. Opening his eyes, he peered cautiously into the sarcophagus.

Inside the stone coffin lay a skeleton, the skull thrown back as if the occupant had died in tortured agony. To all intents and purposes the skeleton appeared to be human, apart from the extended fangs that forced the jaws open in a rictus grin. Finger bones ended in long talons while a portion of the ribcage was shattered.

The wind was rising rapidly and Pieter could feel the hairs on the back of his neck rising. A miasma of dark energy crackled around the edge of the coffin. Pieter could feel its tingle in his fingertips. His pulse quickened.

Walter's blood had collected in a small pool beneath the remains, where it had begun to bubble and hiss strangely, evaporating to become a cloud of red steam. Pieter was unable to tear his gaze from the skeleton, as through the mist he witnessed a terrible transformation. Flesh was coalescing out of the red cloud and attaching itself to the bones. Cords of sinew stretched over the skeleton, pulling the joints into position and binding them together. At the same time tendrils of muscle lashed around the calcified remains, swelling and twitching with new life. Despite his panic, Pieter found himself thinking that the effect was not unlike watching a wax candle melting in a fire, only rapidly in reverse.

As the musculature crawled over the Vampire's chest, the broken ribs were pulled back into place and knitted together. Pieter could see a leathery black organ swelling inside the ribcage with every bellows-like convulsion. Uncurling ears peeled away from the skull and stretched into bat-like points. Balls of yellow fat condensed in the eye sockets as the corpse continued to re-flesh under Pieter's own horrified gaze. New, red-raw

eyelids flicked open and the men looked into the night-black pupils of an evil creature who had been born of darkness centuries before.

With a roar, the dead torches around the walls burst into flame. The wind had risen to a gale. Glancing at Torben, Pieter could see that the mercenary's hair was standing on end – as, he could feel, was his own.

'Quickly! Do it now!' Torben yelled over the howling gale.

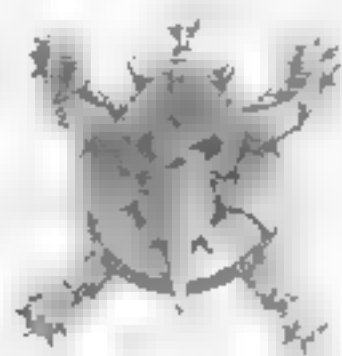
Pieter raised the stake over the Vampire's regenerating body. With a shout born of fury, frustration and despair he plunged the whitethorn down towards the creature's black, pumping heart.

His hand was suddenly halted as, with lightning speed, the Vampire's own skeletal hand seized his wrist in a grip of iron. Pieter watched helplessly as the skinless horror sat up in the coffin, meat still solidifying on its bones. An unnerving hiss escaped from between the Vampire's fattening lips and a pointed tongue darted from between its bestial fangs.

Then the mercenary was between them, the rusted railing in his hands once more. With one vicious thrust, the spear-like tip passed easily through the creature's ribs and punctured the black bag of muscle that was the Vampire's heart. The half-formed, undead creature opened its mouth to scream, jaw ligaments tearing, but its useless lungs had already begun to collapse. All that issued from the dying Vampire's throat was a rasping breath that stank of death and decay.

The crypt was suddenly a hive of activity. Somehow free of the Vampire brood, the rest of the party burst into the tomb. The hulking Stanislav ran forward, a sexton's spade gripped in his hands. With one swing, the blunt edge of the spade separated the Vampire's head from its shoulders and sent it sailing across the crypt. Its corpse began to decompose at once. New-formed flesh shrivelled and turned to dust, swirling around the coffin in tiny eddies. In seconds all that remained of the Vampire were a few crumbling bones. Stanislav strode over to the corner of the crypt where the creature's head had landed. With one stamp of his boot, the deformed skull was shattered against the flag-stoned floor.

The mercenary leader looked down at the contents of the coffin and ran a hand through his thick black hair. 'I told you we should have gone to Ostermark,' he said.



THE GREAT BONFIRE hissed and crackled as the bodies of the Vampires were burnt to ash. The funeral pyre bathed the graveyard and particularly the Morderischen family tomb in flickering orange light. Yet despite the eerily-moving shadows the carved gargoyles did not seem quite so menacing anymore. Pieter sat staring disconsolately into the flames, looking at something in another time and place. His eyes were dry. He would shed no more tears.

He had been wracked all night with conflicting feelings of grief, unfairness and anger. Rosamund was gone. Walter was dead. In one night he had seen what cruelties the world had to offer. Pieter looked down at the slab of stone covering Walter's grave, on which he sat. The wolves would not have him.

It was less than an hour from dawn and the moon was beginning to set. Although none of them had slept, Torben and his companions were preparing to leave.

'How's your arm?' Torben asked Yuri.

'Better now it's bandaged,' Yuri said.

'Thank Sigmar the creatures out here dropped dead when you killed that monster in the crypt,' Stanislav said.

'We'd all have been dead men otherwise,' Alexi agreed, hitching up his sling.

'We'd better be off.' The mercenary captain was in good humour after the night's events. 'We've got to meet up with Krakov and the lovely Lady Isolde,' he said with a grin. 'Come one, lads. We'll be in Ostermark by noon.' He turned to Pieter. 'What will you do now?'

The young man shrugged.

'You could come with us,' Torben suggested almost casually. 'Besides, we need you as a witness to what happened here last night.'

'That's right. The Lady Isolde will believe a man of your breeding,' Yuri said.

'Why not?' Pieter said with a shrug.

'Oh fine,' Oran muttered quietly. 'Another pocket to split the gold with. Just what we need.'

'That's settled then,' Torben said with a smile. Adjusting his pack, he turned towards the lightening sky to the east. 'I hope Krakov's got the first round in.'



FROM THE BASE of the tower on the hill overlooking Ostenwald, the Lady Isolde watched the funeral pyre burn with piercing green eyes. She inhaled deeply, savouring the smell of the roasting corpses carried on the breeze. The mercenary band had been a good choice and the girl's distraught sweetheart an unexpected bonus.

She turned her gaze from the cemetery and patted the head of her newest servant almost affectionately. The shrivelled one-eyed thing dressed in black, ill-fitting clothes at her side grunted in response as a cat might purr at being stroked. 'Good boy, Krakov,' she breathed. She had never had a Kislevite in her thrall before.

Those fool priests a century ago had underestimated her. They had thought that her brother was the stronger of the siblings and so had spent longer binding him inside his coffin. That had been the advantage she needed as over time the charms sealing her own tomb had lost their potency.

Now her cruel brother would never control her again. She would become the Mistress of Ostenwald Tower and the surrounding countryside. The peasantry would be as cattle to her, there merely as a source of sustenance or assistance as she saw fit.

'Sleep well, brother,' the Lady Isolde purred and a smile parted her full red lips. As she smiled, the last rays of moonlight caught the glistening point of an elongated incisor. ●





• LAST • CHANCE

BY
GAV THORPE

THE ROAR OF IMMENSE GUNS drowned out the ominous rumblings of the storm clouds that had gathered over the ancient fortress. The forks and flashes of lightning were barely flickers against the backdrop of muzzle flare and tracer rounds that illuminated the swelling underbelly of the black mass. A hundred guns studded the immense curtain wall pouring a torrent of massive shells and bolts of laser energy on the Imperial forces besieging the rebel citadel of Coritanorum.

No human sound could be heard in the tumult, only the endless and eternal pounding of shells being fired and the muffled crumps of detonations spewing tons of sodden earth high into the air. With an almighty crash the heaven's opened, and rain spilled through the air to further soak the muddied ground. Like bullets, droplets of water bounced and ricocheted, rattling on the hulls of dug-in tanks and pattering off the armoured roofs of bunkers.

Lieutenant Martinez strode along the trench, the rain spattering off his poncho and dripping down the peak of his officer's cap. His knee-length riding boots, once so well polished and pristine, were caked in filth; a noxious mixture of mud, blood and other effluence of warfare. As he passed, the Imperial Guardsmen snapped to attention, saluting smartly with a nod of obedience.

Martinez ignored them as he climbed up a worn steel ladder to the watchtower. 'Watchtower' was perhaps too grandiose a term for the makeshift shelter that had been carved into the side of the trench, putting it no more than half a metre higher than the trench wall itself. Sand bags, shapeless and brown from the incessant onslaught of the rain, were piled to the front. The trooper on watch duty saluted as Martinez knelt on one knee next to him.

'Make your report, Guardsman!' snapped the Lieutenant. He was in a sour mood, having had no sleep the night before due to the Captain's continued calls for reports, and the last thing he wanted was for some ignorant trooper to call him out of the command bunker in this Emperor-damned weather just because the dumb sentry had started seeing things.

'I definitely saw movement, sir! It was just over that ridge to the left. I've not seen anything for a while though.'

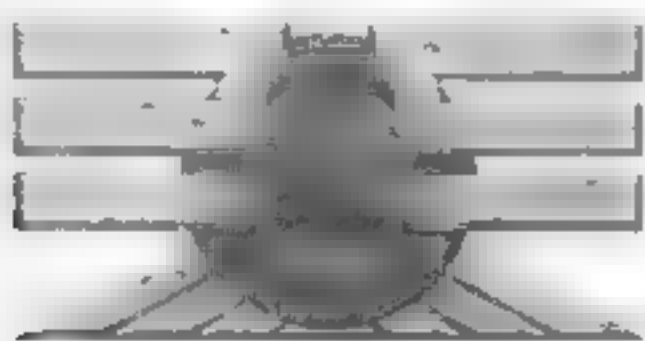
'Enemy infiltrators, do you think?'

'It was just as the storm broke sir, I couldn't see much and by the time I'd got the Magnox focused it was gone.'

'Very well, keep an...' Martinez stopped and stared through the pounding rain as he saw a silhouette flitting towards the trench, moving from crater to crater, shattered tree stump to ruined walls and blasted hedges. He was about a hundred metres out and coming closer. The Guardsman had already raised the Magnox and he whispered, as if in awe.

'One of ours, sir... He's passed the wire, but he's got to cross Sniper's Hole to reach us.'

The trooper and Lieutenant both looked on in stunned amazement as the figure suddenly stopped skulking and rose up, sprinting towards them.



EVER BEEN TEN strides from death? Not a nice feeling. The trench is seventy strides away and in sixty the snipers will trace me and I'm gonna get a bullet trepanning. I was always fast, but you can't outrun fate, as my Sarge used to say.

Fifty strides from safety and the first shot whistles past my ear. At forty I drop my lasgun in the mud. Light as they are, they don't let you pump your arms properly for the type of speed I need if I'm going to get myself out of this. If I'm too slow now, having a gun ain't gonna help me a whole lot.

At thirty strides someone calls in the mortars and suddenly there's explosions all around throwing up water and muck, spattering me with dirt. Luckily I'm dodging left and right too, so only luck will help them out, you can't correct a mortar that quick.

Something else, larger than a bullet, goes crashing past me and sends up a plume of debris as it explodes. Oh great! Still twenty strides to go and some smart frag-head has grabbed a grenade launcher. Fifteen strides from life, five from death, bet nobody would give me odds on surviving now!

A ball of plasma roars past me, almost blinding me as it explodes against the shattered hull of an abandoned Leman Russ. I'm eight strides off when I feel something punch into my shoulder from the left. Instinct takes over and I dive forward. Oh frag! I'm at the trench! Double frag! I land head first in the mud and I swear I hear my shoulder snap as I hit the ground two metres further down than I thought I would.

MARTINEZ BARKED AN order and the throng that had gathered around the stranger dissipated instantly, giving him room to stride through. What the Lieutenant saw appalled every instinct he possessed and every concept of dignity he had learnt at the Exercitatio Praefectus. The newcomer was in a bedraggled state; slick with mud and rain, the fastenings on his tunic hurriedly tied and his cap wedged onto his head in a misshapen lump.

'On your feet, Guardsman!'

The trooper gave him a surly look and pushed himself to his feet to lean against a trench support batten, seeking shelter from the incessant downpour. Martinez was taken aback when he actually saw the soldier's face. His eyes were dark, like his sodden hair, and brooding, but it was not the venomous stare that disturbed the Lieutenant, insolent as it was. What gave Martinez pause for thought was the criss-cross of scars that were etched into the fighter's cheeks and forehead. One particularly puckered hole over the man's left eye seemed very recent, still red with a muddied scab.

'Name, Guardsman!' barked Martinez, determined not to show his discomfort at confronting such an obvious veteran.

The man swayed for a moment as if hit by dizziness and mumbled it out. 'Kage.'

'What is the meaning of this? You look a total state! I don't know how discipline is maintained in your platoon, Guardsman, but here I expect every soldier to maintain standards appropriate to the Regiment. Get yourself cleaned up! And you will address me as 'sir', or I'll have you flogged for insubordination. Is that clear?'

'Yes... sir,' the newcomer snarled.



THIS FRAGGING jumped-up nobody Lieutenant is beginning to grate on my nerves. Still, I only have myself to blame. I know these

damned Mordians are really tagged up on being smart and shiny. I should've looked for a corpse more my size rather than grabbing the first uniform I came across. On the other hand, I've made it to the trench in one piece. That's phase one of my plan complete.

Suddenly, I catch the distinctive scent of gun oil close by, hear the snick of a safety being released and feel a cold metal muzzle poking into the back of my neck. I slowly turn round and face a jutting chin big enough to bulldoze buildings with. Glancing up I pass over the face and focus my attention on the Commissar's cap, resplendent with its braiding and solid gold eagle. Frag me, this guy looks almost as mean as the Colonel!

"Kage"? Your flash says "Hernandez", Guardsman. Just who are you, and what are you doing?

The Commissar's voice was gravelly, just like all Commissars' voices. Do they train them to speak like that, making them chew on razor blades or something? I can't believe I hadn't checked out the dead guy's name before putting on his uniform! Frag, this is getting too hot!

'Lieutenant Kage, sir! I'm special ops, covert operations kinda thing.'

'I was not aware of any special units in this sector.'

'With respect, sir, that's the idea. Hardly covert if everyone knows you're around.'

Well, I hadn't lied. You don't get much more special than my unit.

'Who is your commanding officer?'

'I'm sorry, but I cannot disclose that to anyone outside of the unit, sir.'

'I'm placing you under armed guard, pending confirmation of your story by Command Headquarters. Lieutenant Martinez, detail five men to watch this prisoner. If he so much as looks out of this trench, shoot him!'

As the Lieutenant nominates a handful of men to watch me, the Commissar strides off towards the comms bunker I'd seen when I'd been waiting for the storm to cover my dash. The Lieutenant disappears too, ordering everybody back to their duties, leaving me with the five hopeless cases standing around me.

I SLUMP BACK TO the bottom of the trench, ignoring the mud and filth that splashes around me. For the first time I check out my shoulder. It's just a flesh wound; the bullet had left a small furrow about a thumb's length across my left shoulder. Flexing it hurts like hell, but I can tell it isn't actually dislocated, just jarred. I pluck a needle and some wire thread from the survival pack inside my left boot and begin stitching, gritting my teeth against the pain.

My guards look on aghast and it's then that I first realise what's been nagging at my brain since I'd first splashed down in the trench. These soldiers are young. I mean really young; some of them look about sixteen years old, the oldest must be twenty at the most. A bunch of wet-backs, freshly drafted in to fight. I then notice a satchel just off to my left, gold-tinged foil packages stuffed in its pockets. With a flick of my head in its direction, I quiz the youngest soldier.

'That a ration pack? Sure looks like one. Do you get fed regular here? Frag, you don't know how grateful I'd be for just a bite to eat. Any chance?'

With a worried look to his comrades the raw recruit shuffles over to the satchel and pulls out a can. With a twist he opens it up and passes me the hard biscuit inside.

'Eat it quick,' he says. 'The rain gets them soggy in no time and they're awful if that happens.' His voice is high-pitched and quivering and he shoots a nervous glance over his shoulder at the others and then up the trench. I laugh.

'You mean "Eat it quick before Lieutenant frag-brain or that dumb Commissar come back", don't you?' My imitation of his nasal whine makes the others grin before they can stop themselves.

The young Guardsman is silent as he steps back and squats down on the opposite side of the trench, his lasgun cradled between his legs. The oldest one speaks up, his voice a little firmer, a little harder.

'Between us, why are you here? Are you really Special Ops? What's it like?'

I stare into his narrow brown eyes, sparkling with moisture. Rain runs down his cheeks and makes me realise how thirsty I am. But, I wouldn't trust the stuff pouring out of the sky right now. 'You dig out a canteen of water and I'll clear this smoke out of my throat and tell you,' I offer. The flask is in my hand almost instantly and I grin stupidly for a moment as the cool liquid spills down my parched throat. Without handing it back, I flip the cap shut again and wedge it into the mud next to me.

'Oh. I'm definitely very special, boys. I don't know if you wet-backs have ever heard about us, but you're about to. You see, I'm with the Last Chancers.'



AS I EXPECT, this statement is met with blank incomprehension. These rookies don't know anything outside their platoon, but I'm gonna change that, for sure. 'Your Lieutenant, he's very keen on discipline, isn't he?' Nods of agreement. 'I expect he's made it very clear what the different punishments for various infractions are. Flogging, staking, firing squad and all the rest. Has he told you about Vincularum? No? well it's a Gulag, basically. You're sent to some prison planet to rot away for the rest of your life. Now, there's one of those prison planets, it doesn't have a name, down near the southern rim. That's where I was sent.'

One of the guards, a slim youngster with ridiculously wide eyes, speaks up. 'What had you done?'

'Well, it's kind of a long story. My platoon were doing sentry on some backwater hole called Stygies, down near Ophelia. It was a real easy number, watching a bunch of degenerate peasants grubbing around in the dirt, making sure nothing nasty happened to them. In those situations you have to provide your own excitement, know what I mean?'

Again the blank stares. Never mind.

'Well, back on Stygies they have this contest, called the Path of Fate. It's like one of those obstacle courses you must have gone over a thousand times during your training. Only a lot worse. This was one mean fraggin' test, make no mistake. Every month the bravest locals all line up for a race over the Path of Fate. There's a pit of boiling water to swing across, deadfall traps, pitfalls with spikes, not to mention the fact that in the final half mile you're allowed to attack the other contenders, right? Anyway, after watching this go on for a few months, my Sergeant, he starts running a book on each race. After all, the contenders have to announce their intentions well in advance, and going on past experience he could work out the odds according to their previous form and their local reputation. I mean, these fraggers were hard as nails, but some of them were just rock, you know?'

A few nods this time. Lucky old me...

'We used to gamble rations, that sort of thing. But that kinda gets boring after a while. Then we moved onto more valuable stuff, picked up from the local artisans. Things like gold necklets, gems and stuff. I mean, all we did was give 'em a few ration packs and they would sell their daughters, it was amazing. Well, speaking of young ladies, I had my eye on one particular sweet little thing.' I grinned at the memory. 'The Sarge was soft on her too and rather than contest with each other, neither of us liked the idea of sharing you know, we gambled first rights on the next Path of Fate. I won, but the Sarge got sour. Fat people often get like that, and he was immense what with all the easy living and free rations. Anyway, he bawls me out one day, threatening to report me to the Lieutenant for something he'd made up unless I gave him the wench. That was it, I just pulled my blade and gutted the fat fragger there and then. Course, they hauled me off of there quicker than you can say it and I end up out on this Gulag.'

Their open-mouthed astonishment is hilarious. One of them stutters something incomprehensible and continues staring

at me like I've grown an extra head or something.

Then the older one pipes up. 'You murdered your Sergeant over a woman?'

'Yeah, and I didn't get to have her in the end anyway, did I?' I take another swig of water to moisten my tongue and then cock my head to one side to listen to what was going on outside the trench. 'You boys better move over to this side of the trench.'

They look at me, Wide Eyes frowning, the older one with his mouth half-open, the others not really paying attention.

'Move it! Now!'

The commanding tone in my voice makes them act instantly, leaping across to my side and thudding down in the muck as well. The sound of explosions gets rapidly closer and suddenly the whole trench line is engulfed in a raging torrent of shells. Red fire explodes everywhere, plasma shells spewing a torrent of molten death onto the far side of the trench where the recruits had been lounging.

Stupid fraggers, did nobody tell them to use the lee of the trench to protect themselves during an artillery attack? And it goes without saying that they hadn't heard the pause in the gunfire that suggested a change of aiming point, or the whistle of the first shells heading our way. Emperor's blood, I would have made a brilliant training officer if I didn't have such a lousy temper!



STRANGE AS IT SEEMS, even the thunderous tumult of a barrage soon gets relegated to being background noise, and you learn to ignore the shaking ground.

It's Wide Eyes who speaks first, pulling his collar up as a gust of wind sends the rain spraying into the underhang of the trench.

'Why are you here if you're supposed to be on this prison planet? Did you escape or something?'

'If I'd escaped, do you really think I would end up in this grave-bait war? I don't think so! But I did try to get out once. You have to understand that this world wasn't a prison like the brig aboard ship. There were only a few guards, and they had this massive fortified tower out on the central plains. Apart from that, you were just kicked out into the wastelands and forgotten. I mean, really! It's just like any other world, there're empires and lords and stuff. The meanest fraggers get to the top and the weak are just left by the wayside or killed and preyed upon. If you're strong, you survive, if you ain't...' I let it hang.

'Anyway, I gets into the retinue of this guy called Tagel. Big fragger from Catachan, and they breed 'em really big deep in that hellhole. He'd directed an artillery barrage on friendly troops 'cause his Captain had called him names or some equally petty stupidity. He was fighting against a rag-tag bunch from across the other side of the valley, who had a nice little still going brewing up some really potent juice. Anyway, I kinda led some of Tagel's guys into an ambush on purpose, but before I can get to the other side they're hunting me. It may be a big planet, but when you've got that red-faced fragger chasing you everywhere you start getting the idea that this planet isn't the best place to be, know what I mean?'

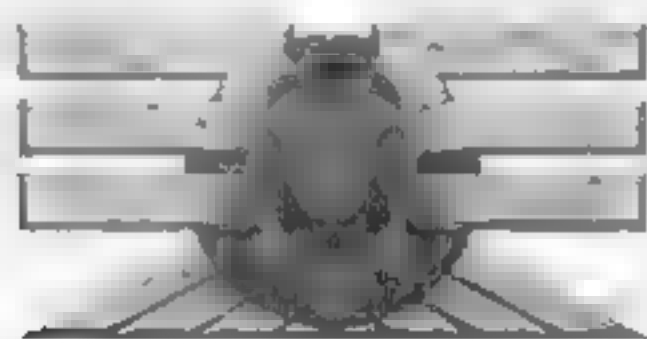
'Anyway, there's this supply shuttle every four months. I holed out long enough until one was due and then forged my way across the plains. I hid out for a few days, waiting nice and patient. Then the shuttle comes in, as I'd hoped. I sneak real close to the station while they're all excited about getting their visitors. Then the gates open so's they can let out the latest bunch of sorry malcontents. In the confusion I scrag one of the guards and swipe his uniform. I slip into the complex just as the gates are closing and then it's time to head for the shuttle. I'd just bluffed my way to the landing pad when the body's spotted and the alarm's raised.'

Their eyes are fixed to me like a sniper's sight, hanging on each word. Can I tell a story or what?

'So, I knife a couple more frag-heads to clear a way through and I'm up the ramp and inside. Just as the door's about to close there's someone up ahead of me. Without thinking I thrust with my stained blade into this guy's shoulder. He just takes it, can you believe that? A span of mono-edge in his arm and the guy just takes a pace back. I look up into his face, 'cause this guy is one big meatgrinder, if you take my meaning, and there's these cold blue eyes just staring at me, icy to the core. He backhands me, breaking my jaw as I later find out, and I go down. I get a boot in the crotch and then a pistol butt to the back of my head. Last thing I hear is this guy laughing. Laughing! I hear him say something which I'll never forget.'

Their eyes ask the question before their mouths can move.

"Just my type of scum!" is what he says!



THE BARRAGE FROM Coritanorum has moved on, dropping its payload of death and misery on some other poor souls, not that I give them a second thought. Rations Boy asks the obvious question. 'Who was he, how did he get you here?'

'That was the Colonel. Colonel Schaeffer, no less. Commander of the Last Chancers.'

Wide Eyes jumps in with the next obvious question. 'Who are the Last Chancers?'

'The 13th Penal Legion. Of course, there's been hundreds more than thirteen raisings, but we've always been called the 13th on account of our bad luck.'

Wide Eyes is full of questions at the moment. He takes his cap off and flicks water from the brim into the trench,

revealing his close-cropped blond hair. It's smudged with brown and black from the dirt and muck that this whole Emperor-damned world is covered in. 'What bad luck?'

'Our bad luck to have the Colonel in command.' I give them a grin. 'We get the dirtiest missions he can find. Suicide strikes, rear-guards, forlorn hope for assaults. You name the nastiest situation you could ever imagine and I'd bet a week's rations the Colonel has been in it. And survived, more importantly. We get a hundred guys gunned down in the first volley and he'll walk through the entire battle without a scratch. Not a fragging scratch!'

One of the others, silent until now, opens his thin-lipped mouth to ask one of the most sensible questions I'd heard in a long time. 'So why are you *here*? I know I've not had much experience of battle, but I know this isn't a suicide run. I mean, we're new here; why bother raising a whole new Regiment just to throw them away?'

'You so sure it ain't a suicide run? You seen the lights, flares heading up, to the west?' Nods of agreement. 'They ain't flares. They're landing barges evacuating this battle-zone. There's twenty or thirty transports up there in orbit, waiting to pull out. Guess they've decided to wipe out everything from space - virus bombs, mass drivers and all the rest. Coritanorum's a lost cause now. The rebels are too well dug in. There's been thirty-eight assaults in the last eighteen months and we haven't advanced an inch. They're pulling back and guess who's left to hold the front line...'

'But we're behind the front, so what're you doing back here?'

There's a distant whine behind us, getting louder and louder. The recruits duck into shelter, but I know what's coming and take a peek over the trench to see the show. Suddenly, there's a howling roar directly overhead and a squadron of Marauders streak across the sky, Thunderbolt fighters spiralling around them in an escort pattern. While the others cower in stupidity, I see a line of fiery blossoms raging across the enemy

positions. Our own artillery has set up a counter-barrage and the incoming fire suddenly stops. Then the attack run of the Marauders hits, sending up a plume of smoke as their bombs detonate and the blinding pulses of lascannon smash through the enemy fortifications and explode their ammo dumps. The ground attack is over in an instant as the planes light their afterburners and scream off into the storm.

'Hey boys! Take a look at this, you won't see another one for a while!'

The recruits timidly poke their heads out, and give me a quizzical look.

'Bombardment, air attack – next comes the orbital barrage. Those damned rebels are in for some hot stuff tonight!'

Just as I finish speaking, the clouds are brilliantly lit up in one area and a moment later there's an immense ball of energy flashing towards Coritanorum. The fusion torpedo smashes into the citadel's armoured walls, smearing along the scarred and pock-marked metal like fiery oil. Several more salvos rain down through the storm, some shells kicking up huge plumes of steam as they bury themselves in the mud before detonating, others causing rivulets of molten metal to pour down Coritanorum's walls like lava flows.

Then the rebels' anti-strike batteries open up, huge turrets swivel skywards and blasts of laser energy punch up into the atmosphere. For almost a minute the return fusillade continues, dissipating the clouds above the fortress with the heat of their attack. The ship in orbit must have pulled out, as no more death comes spilling from the cloud cover.

Half a minute later a siren sounds along the whole trench. Rations Boy looks up, face suddenly pale and lip trembling. 'That's the standby order. Next one sounds the attack.'

This is my big chance. In the confusion of the attack, it'll be easy to slip out the other side of the trench and get myself out of here. As stimulating as their company is, I don't want to be anywhere near these recruits for more than another half-minute.

'I'd wish you luck, but I'm afraid I'm hogging that all to myself just for now.' I smile, but they don't look reassured. Never mind.

Just then the grim-faced Commissar comes striding round the corner of the trench, his beady eyes fixed on me. 'Bring the prisoner with you when we advance. Let him go and I'll have all of you up on a charge of negligence!'

Frag! Still, an order's one thing, but execution's another.

Then the attack siren sounds. I'm being pushed out first, so I guess my new friends have learnt one thing, at least. I start sprinting cross the open killing ground to the next trench line. The enemy snipers, who I'd avoided so nimbly before, get a second chance at skinning my hide. There's a yell and Wide Eyes goes down as a bullet smashes through his neck, spraying spine and blood over my stolen uniform. I snatch up his lasgun and send a volley of shots from the hip into the sniper's probable hiding place. No more shots ring out for the moment.

Then something grabs my leg. Looking down I see the hard-headed Commissar down on his knees coughing blood, broken. He looks at me with those hard eyes and whispers, 'Do something decent with your life for a change, treacherous scum!'

Without a thought I turn the lasgun round and grant him his wish. The beams of murderous light silencing him forever. I must be getting soft. I've never bothered with a mercy killing before now, specially this knee-deep in trouble.



WITH THE COMMISSAR down, this is my chance to break for it. I just have to turn round and run straight back the way we just came. I don't think the rebels are going to bother shooting at someone running in the opposite direction. Just then I notice

something, probably the enemy, casting a shadow in the lightning, just ahead of us to the right. Damned snipers must be laughing it up tonight. I look about as a shot plucks at my tunic – maybe I was wrong about an easy getaway. There's a ruined farmstead on the left and I head for it. With the resumption of sniper fire, some of the rookie platoon is face down in the mud, hiding or dead, I don't know. The rest are standing around, milling about in confusion. Someone I don't know gets in my way, his eyes strangely vacant with desperation as more and more of the rookies are gunned down by hidden foes. I slam my fist into his weasel face and as he stumbles out of my way he goes down, his chest blown out by a bullet that would have hit me. Another couple of heartbeats and I'm over the wall of the farm and kneeling in some kind of animal pen.

Right, now that I've separated myself from those no-hopers, time to formulate my escape plan. Then there's the thud of boots all around me and I realise that the platoon has followed me into cover instead of carrying on their planned advance to the next trench! A journey, I might add, that they would have never finished.

One of the little soldier boys grabs my collar and shouts in my ear. 'Good thinking, sir! We'd have been butchered if you hadn't brought us here!'

Frag! '*Brought* you here? I didn't fraggin' bring you here, you dumb rookies! Frag, you stupid wetbacks are gonna get me killed, hangin' around here with "Target" written all over you as badly as if it was in bright lights five metres high! Get outta my face before I skin you, you stupid little fragger!'

Chips of masonry are flying everywhere now as the snipers bring their high-powered rifles to bear on us. Well, as long as these space-heads are around, I might as well use them to my advantage. As Tagel used to say, an iron ball around your leg can still be used to smash someone's head in. Actually, that was probably one of the longest sentences the dumb brute had ever used, so I figure he'd heard it off someone else. Pulling

my thoughts back to the problem in hand, I point through the downpour towards the escarpment where the snipers are laying in cover and yell out an order.

'Suppression fire on that ridge!'

Drilled for months while in transit to this hellhole, the platoon reacts without thought. The guys around me open up with their lasguns, a torrent of light pulsing through the darkness. I find the shattered casing of a solar boiler and use its twisted panes to get some cover from the shells knocking chunks off the plascrete wall of the outhouse. Little did my boys know, but those shuttles wouldn't hang around forever, and I've still got every intention of warming my behind on one of those seats.

There's a shouted greeting and the remnants of another squad joins us, two of the Guardsmen carrying grenade launchers. They start fiddling with their sights to get the correct trajectory but by this time there's more incoming fire as the snipers behind the ridge get reinforcements. I snatch one of the launchers, select a frag round and send the charge sailing through the air. I grin madly, along with others I note, as three bodies are tossed into view by the explosion. Casting the launcher back to the Guardsman, I draw the concealed knife from my right boot and charge. Not too far now.



AS I LEAP OVER A mound of bodies, I see the rest of the platoon on either side of me, pouring over the ridge. The traitors are stunned by the sudden attack and soon hacked down in a storm of lasgun fire and slashing bayonets. I gut two of the rebel swine myself. From there it's just a matter of half a minute's jogging to the forward trench line. As the others set off I turn on my heel and start heading back to the

second line, which now would hopefully be empty. I see the grox-breath Lieutenant to my right. He sees me too. But before he can say anything, him and his Command Squad are knocked off their feet in a bloody cloud by a hail of fire. I see shadows moving up on the left, cutting me off from my route to the shuttles – for now at least.

As I splash down in the front-line trench, I hear the Sergeants crying out the roll-call. There's lots of names that get no reply and I guess they've lost about three-quarters of the men. The others are gonna die as soon as the rebels counter-attack, and I'm gonna make damn sure I'm not around to suffer a similar fate. Suddenly I realise everyone's looking at me, expectation in their eyes.

'What the frag is this? What're you looking at, for Emperor's sake?'

It's the oldest one of my guards who makes the plea.

'Lieutenant Martinez is dead! The Command squad are all dead!'

'And?'

'And you saw to Commissar Caeditz!'

'Yeah, and?' I don't like the sound of this at all. I dare not believe it, but I have a feeling something bad is happening.

'We're stuck here until another Command squad gets sent up. There's no-one in command. Well, except you. You said you were a Lieutenant.'

'Yeah, of a fraggin' Penal Legion platoon! That don't mean nothing in the real world.'

'You got us this far,' pipes up another nuisance, his face streaked with rain and blood, his lips swollen and bruised.

'Look, no offence, but the last thing I need right now is a bunch of wet-backed brainless fraggers like you weighing me down. I got me this far. You guys have just tagged along for the ride. There's a seat on one of those stellar transports with my name on it, and I fully intend to sit in it. *Do you understand?*'

'But you can't just leave us!' comes the call from someone at the back.

The pitiful misery in their eyes is truly galling. There's no chance in creation I'm gonna lumber myself with this thankless

task. I set about rummaging through the packs they've dumped in the trench to see if I can scrag some rations. I feel a faint tremor in the ground and look up. I see movement in the darkness, and as the wind subtly changes direction it brings the faint smell of oil smoke. Out in the rainswept darkness of the night I can make out the silhouette of a rebel Demolisher siege tank rumbling forwards. By its course I can tell the crew haven't seen us yet, but as soon as they pass a clump of twisted concrete columns to our right, we'd be sitting ducks. Bad news, bad news indeed.

'Listen up! I am not in command! I am going to leave you to your just fate! Make no bones, but there's a Demolisher on the prowl out there and he's gonna blow us to little pieces with that big gun of his if we give him the chance.'

I'm thinking really hard now. Maybe this would give me the chance I needed to get away. I've survived for years on my wits, and I wasn't going to give up that easily now. Being alive is a hobby of mine, and I don't feel like giving it up right now.

'Do exactly what I say and I may just get out of this with my skin.'

They listen intently, staring up at me with expectant eyes as I detail the plan. I check they understand and as they all nod I send them on their way. As the Demolisher rumbles forward someone switches on a searchlight on the turret. Its hull glistens with the rain and the steady sheet of water pouring from the sky reflects along the beam's length. Damn! I hadn't thought of that! Still, it's too late now, the plan's in motion and to shout now would be asking for death. I signal my bunch of guys to hunker down more as the others move out into position. I watch the Demolisher constantly, as it slowly grinds its way through piles of bones, smashing aside small walls, its bulldozer blade creating a furrow in the deep mud. The searchlight is swinging left and right, but we're slightly behind it now and the commander isn't checking every angle. If he spots us, that turret is going to turn round on us, slow as he likes and drop one of those massive

Demolisher shells right on top of my head!

Suddenly the searchlight is swinging my way, sweeping over the ground and harshly illuminating the piled bodies of the dead, our and theirs. It swings onwards and I find myself holding my breath, but a few heartbeats before it's shining in my face it swings back the other way, moving fast. Looking down the beam – the tank's about forty strides from where I'm crouched – I see the other attack party standing rigid. I feel like screaming 'Run, don't stand there!' but when it comes down the line, if I shout I'll be dead just as surely as them. And as I say, I ain't ready to die for a long, long time.

As I had predicted, the turret turns with a slow grinding and the huge Demolisher cannon, wide enough for a man to crawl inside, tilts upwards. With a blossom of flame and a wreath of smoke the tank fires. A moment later the searchlight is outshone by the explosion of the shell. I fancy I see bodies flung into the air, but it's unlikely since Demolisher shells don't usually leave enough of you left to be thrown about. As the flames flicker down the searchlight roves left and right and the heavy bolter in the hull opens up with a flash from its muzzle. In the searchlight beam I see the survivors being kicked from their feet by the attack, blood spraying from exit wounds as the explosive bolts punch through skin, muscle and bone like they were paper.

I snap back to the job in hand. Raising my fist I signal the charge. We run silently towards the tank, no battle cries, no shouts of defiance, just nice and quiet. However, the first guys are still about twenty strides from the tank when the sponson gunner on our side wakes up and opens fire with his heavy flamer. A raging inferno pours out from the side of the tank, and the screams of men is cut short as they're turned into charred hunks of flesh.

The searchlight swivels around towards us, but I level my lasgun and open up on the run, sending two shots into the wide lens and shattering it. I hear a faint cry of alarm as I dodge behind the tank, its

tracks churning wildly as the driver tries to turn it round to bring its weapons to bear.

As those huge steel tracks rumble round so close to me face I could reach out and touch them, I leap up, grabbing onto the engine cover. I pull myself onto the tank's hull and wrench the panel loose to expose the oily, roaring mass of the engine. As the other survivors pile on board, blasting into the engine compartment with their lasguns, I make a jump for the turret.

The commander's shocked expression makes me laugh as I smash the butt of my gun into his chin, breaking his neck. I fire a couple of shots into the hatch and jump inside. The crew are all looking at me with horror, daubed as I am in blood and mud I must seem like some hideous alien come for their hearts. And I have. My knife tears into them, I've always prided myself on my knife-fighting skills, and in a matter of a few breaths it's over.

Suddenly somebody's shouting down the hatch to get out.



I WATCH IN SATISFACTION from the trench as the charges go up, turning the siege tank into a storm of whirling metal debris and tangled wreckage. Right, now the coast was clear, time to head for those evacuation landing bays. Someone grabs my shoulder as I turn to head back across no-mans land. It's someone I don't know, a long scratch across his face and his left side and leg smouldering from a close encounter with a heavy flamer.

'You can't go, Kage, I mean sir! We need you, and you need us!'

'Need you? *Need you?*' I'm almost screaming in frustration. 'Look, I'm heading back. Any of you dumb fraggers tries to follow me and I'm gonna start shooting. I don't need you, you're all liabilities. Is that perfectly clear?'

There's silence. I think a couple of them are gonna start crying, their lips quiver so much. Well tough luck, it doesn't work on Kage, not one bit. I turn and start climbing up the back wall of the trench, towards our own lines. Someone says, 'Give you a hand up, soldier?'

I grab the proffered hand without thinking and get hauled out of the trench by strong arms. As I kneel there in the mud my spine tingles with horror as my mind catches up with events. I look up. Blazing back at me are two pits of coldness, ripping into my soul. The Colonel stands there, gun pointed directly between my eyes!

'Deserting scumbag! You had your last chance. It's time to pay for your crimes!'

Just then he looks away and my fuddled brain suddenly identifies a rush of clicks and whine of power cells. Glancing over my shoulder I see the platoon, the whole sorry, bedraggled mess of them, all with their weapons trained on the Colonel, a wall of lasgun barrels, plasma gun muzzles and even the tube of a grenade launcher. I fight down the hysterical urge to laugh. Some of them are shaking with fear, others are rock-hard and steady. Each one of them is staring at the Colonel with a silent ferocity. It's a scary feeling, like a herd-beast suddenly sprouting fangs. Rations Boy braves the Colonel's wrath with words.

'I- I'm sorry, sir, but Kage doesn't deserve that. If you shoot, we will too.'

Someone else chips in their two-cred worth, his lasgun cradled over the ragged, bloodied mess of a broken arm. 'Yes sir. We'd all be dead three times over if it wasn't for him. We're not going to let you kill him!'

They're all focused now. Their guns are steady, and I can see their eyes filled with bloodlust. The adrenaline is pumping and they're so hyped up they could kill just about anyone right now. Flushed with victory, I heard someone call it once. I can see it, and the Colonel can too. For what seems like an eternity he just stands there, turning that icy stare of his onto them. Each one in turn takes the full force of the Colonel's look, but not one of

them breaks off, and that's saying something! Still, the Colonel is the Colonel and he just sneers.

'This wretched piece of slime isn't worth your time. I recommend you use your ammunition on something more worthwhile.' No one moves and the sneer disappears. 'Very well. You've proved your point, Guardsmen.' The Colonel almost spits the words out.

The bristling guns are as steady as ever.

The Colonel's voice drops to a whisper, a menacing tone that even us in the Last Chancers dread to hear. 'I'm ordering you... to lower your weapons...'

Still no movement.

'Have it your way. You will all be mine soon enough.'

It's several more another long, deep breaths before the first of them lifts his gun away, finally convinced by the Colonel's sincere look. For me, I still think he's gonna blow my brains out.

'On your feet, Kage!' I stand up slowly, not daring to breathe. 'Right, get that uniform off this instant - you don't deserve to wear it!'

As I begin unfastening the tunic, Colonel Schaeffer turns me around so I'm looking at Coritanorum, the heart of the rebel army. Even before the traitors had turned against the Emperor, the stronghold had a reputation for being nigh-on impregnable. Wall upon wall stretch into the hills, gun ports blazing as the artillery barrages a point in the line a few miles west of us. Searchlights roam across the open ground before the fort, showing the rows of razorwire, the mass of plasma and frag minefields, the tank traps, death pits, snares and other weapons of defence. As I watch, a massive armoured gate opens and a column of four Leman Russ tanks spill from a drawbridge across the acid moat, heading south.

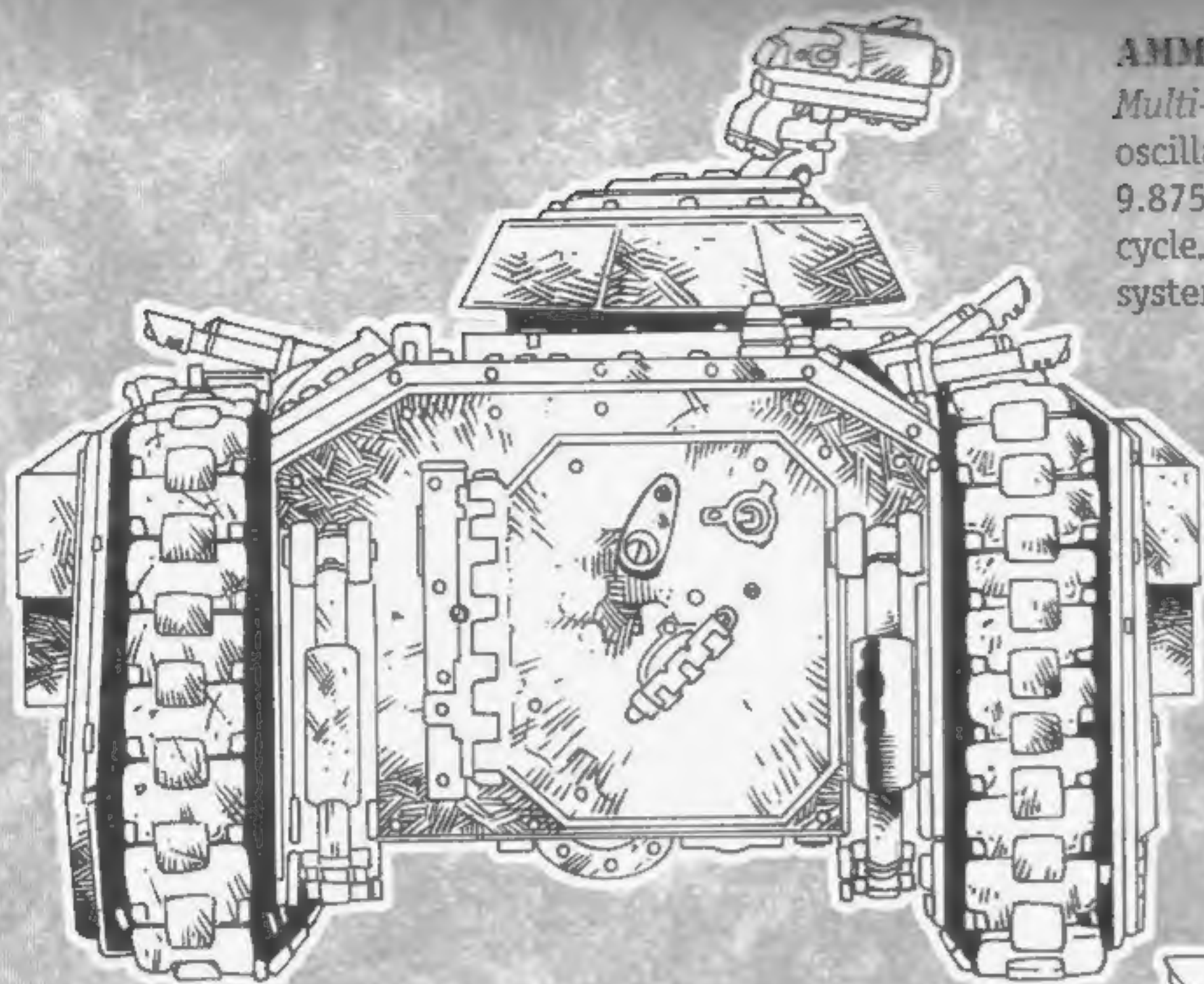
'What happens now, sir?' I ask quietly.

The Colonel points towards the inner keep and whispers in my ear. There is a distinct chuckle in his voice.

'That's what happens now, Kage. Because that's where we're heading.'

Oh frag. ●





AMMUNITION

Multi-laser Mk 8 Martian pattern triple oscillating turbo capacitors capable of 9.875 sec bursts. 14.8 second recharge cycle. Bi-metallic overheating safety system utilising emergency discharge,

rendering weapon inoperative for 29.6 secs; jam probability: 12%

Bolter Weapons Standard bolt shells only (other types may be provided if required and if available)

Lasguns Single Mk9 Rechargeable power packs with external solar convertors.

IMPERIAL GUARD

'CHIMERA'

ARMoured TROOP CARRIER

CREW 3 (driver, turret gunner, heavy bolter gunner)

MASS 38 tonnes

ARMAMENT

Heavy bolter Mk XIV Vulcanor pattern

Storm bolter Mounted on cupola with AA mount

Lasguns XC 49/4 pattern, flash suppressors and integral optic sights

Multi-laser XC 85/2 with replacable barrel, charge readout and flash suppressor (spares carried inside)

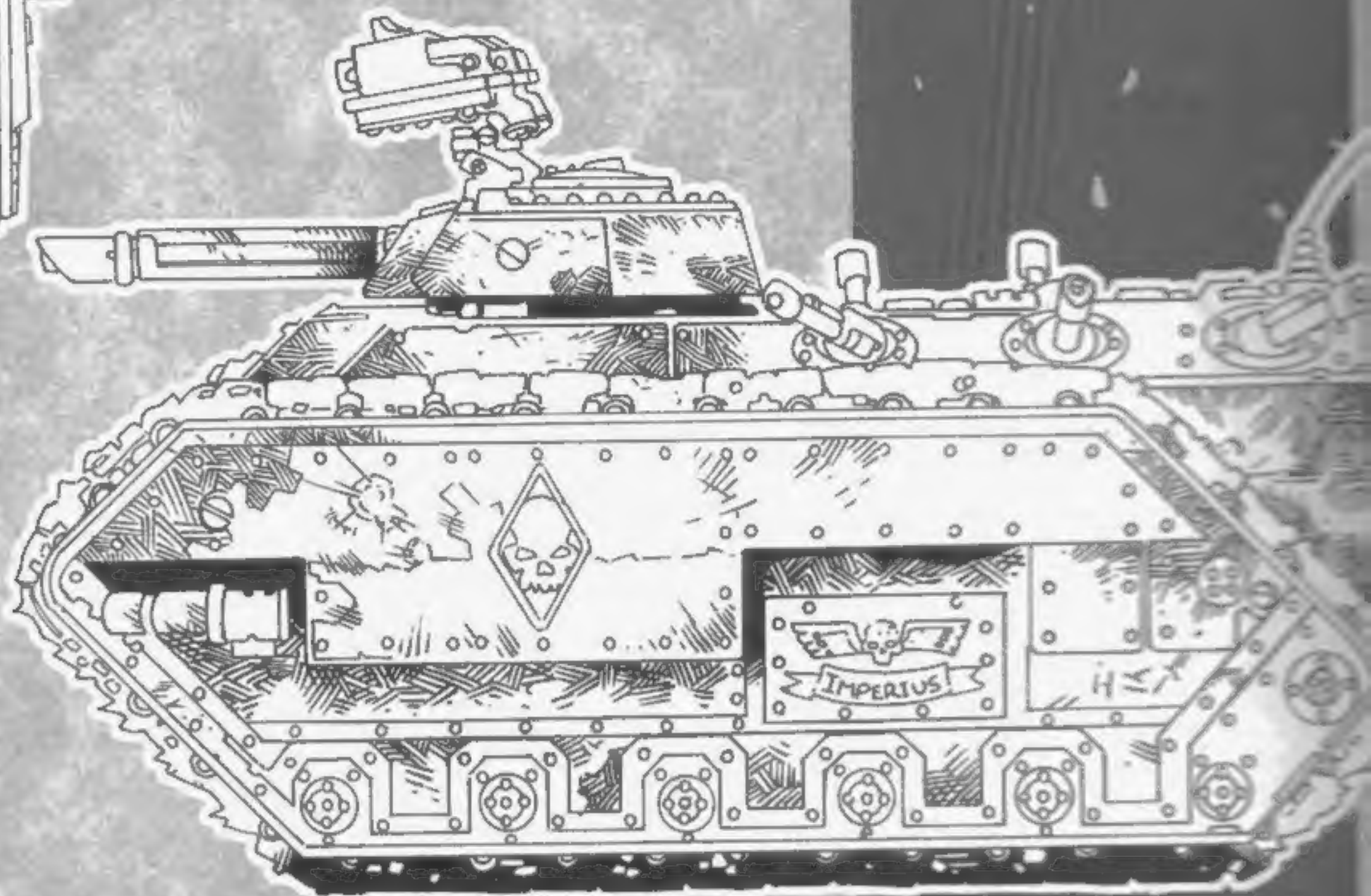
ARMOUR

Conventional steel only (optional explosive reactive armour, 200 blocks)

Thickness 150mm (Front), 80-100mm (side and rear)

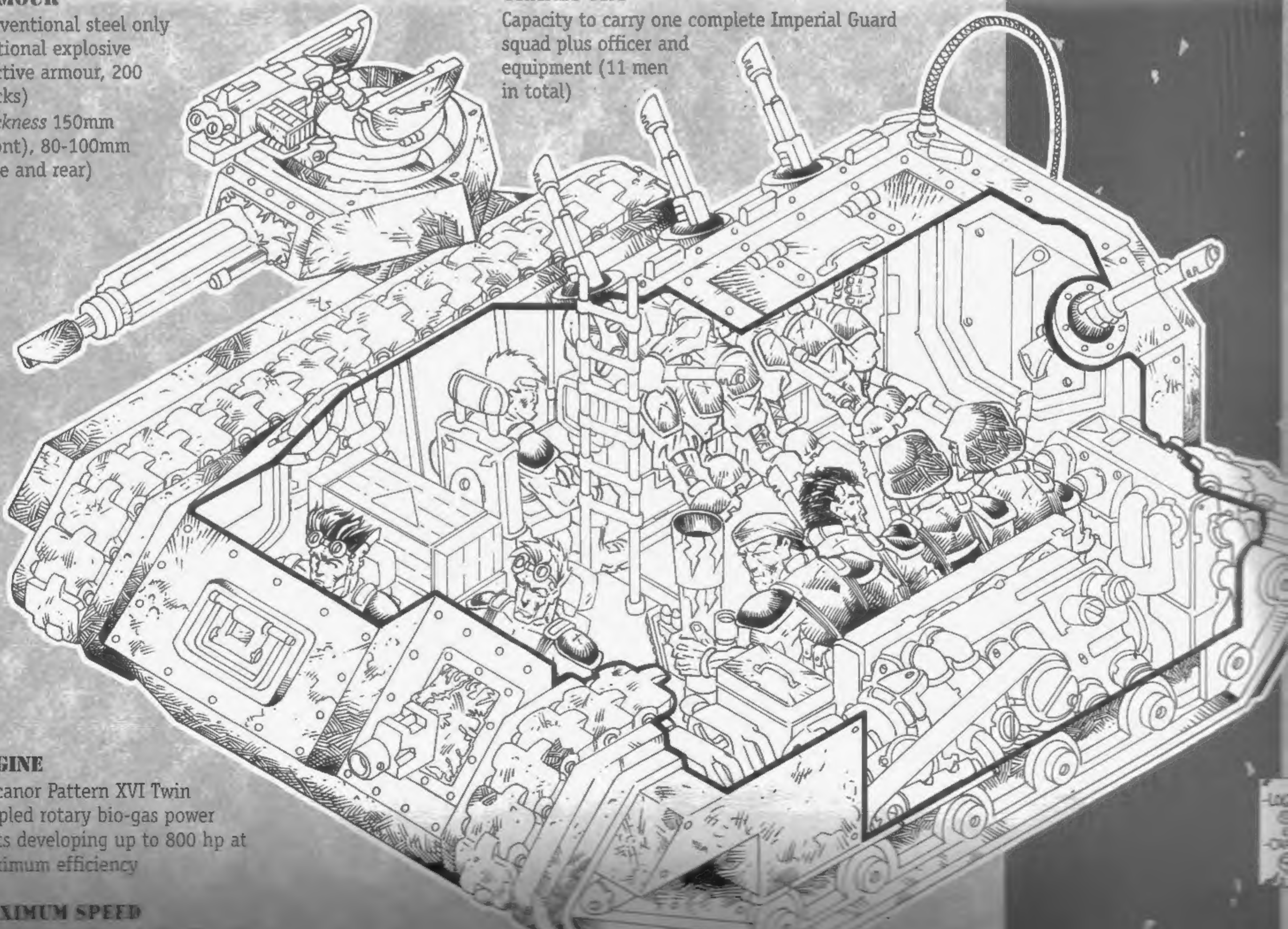
TRANSPORT

Capacity to carry one complete Imperial Guard squad plus officer and equipment (11 men in total)



COMMS

Open band RF comm-link and encrypted orbital uplink



ENGINE

Vulcanor Pattern XVI Twin coupled rotary bio-gas power units developing up to 800 hp at maximum efficiency

MAXIMUM SPEED

• ROLL OF HONOUR •

HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE WORTHY HEROES WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS ISSUE OF INFERNO!



JAMES WALLIS is the director of Hogshead Publishing, the company that produces the *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* game under licence from Games Workshop. The idea for 'The Dead Among Us' came while he was working on the sourcebook *Middenheim: City of Chaos* (plug! plug!). When not doing important gaming things or writing stories, he spends his spare time as the managing editor of the magazine *Bizarre*. He lives in London with three computers and no cats.

SIMON COLEBY's formal art tuition came to an end when he was informed by his college tutor that his drawings were only fit for the tattoo shop. Ignoring this excellent career advice, Simon left college and began to seek a living in the world of comic books, where he has happily spent the last ten years, drawing pictures of

people with really big guns blowing things up. Somewhat inevitably, this has led Simon towards Games Workshop. With his cavalier disregard for the traditional rules of proportion and perspective, Simon has entirely failed to impact upon the rarefied world of fine arts – a situation he hopes will endure for many years to come. Simon currently resides in a world of his own. To date he has no tattoos.

ANDRAS MILLWARD fled from West Wales during the Great Grunge Purges of '94, leaving behind three Welsh novels, a BBC sci-fi radio script and a Nirvana cd. Finding himself, in more than one sense, in Bristol, he now divides his time between writing, manic bursts of hyperactivity and playing guitar in Mos Eisley (the band, not the place). Any time left over is allotted – strictly on a first-come, first-served basis –



between listening to obscure hardcore and pop-punk bands, dabbling in soft comics and hard fanzines, and trying to keep up with the plot of a James Ellroy novel.

JOHN HICKLENTON has been working in comics for eleven years. He has won three awards for his work, including an Eagle award for the strip *Nemesis the Warlock*. He is currently collaborating with Pat Mills for Dark Horse, and has projects in



development with both Pat and Simon Bisley. As well as these he is halfway through his own graphic novel *Acid Sentence* and is continuing to develop a third album as part of the band Deadstock. John currently lives in Surrey with his half-wildcat George. In the event of a nuclear war, John promises to be found in Slough playing the spoons.

SIMON HARRISON has had



no formal art school education, but that hasn't stopped him exhibiting in fine art exhibitions in London and Switzerland, most notably with HR Giger in Zurich at a visionary art show in 1996. Among his many comic strips, perhaps his best known work was on *Strontium Dog* for 2000 AD. When pressed for further details, however, Simon responded with a baffling story about a talking cockroach, which we will spare you lest your sanity be compromised!

BE A HERO!

What a sterling band! If you'd like to join 'em, get in touch. We're looking for short stories, comic art and single-page portraits. Just write to the new address on page 2 and ask for a copy of our *Writer's or Artist's Guidelines*.

Realms of the **INFERNO!**



IN THE NIGHTMARE FUTURE of Warhammer 40,000, mankind teeters on the brink of extinction. The galaxy-wide Imperium is ridden with dangers. Vast armies of green-skinned Orks rampage through the heartlands, while gibbering hordes of grotesque Tyranids assault its borders. Worse, within the Warp, malevolent forces gather, their only aim to crush mankind. Only the Emperor can protect humanity. At the forefront of his armies stand the Imperial Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors ready to fight to the death on the blazing battlefields of a thousand wars.

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INFERNO!

The Dead Among Us by James Wallis

It was her. She looked like hell, as you would if you had been murdered a day ago. Her movements were jerky, and there seemed to be no sight in her eyes or expression on her face except a blank grin. With her one arm she clasped the torso of Brother Rickard. The rest of him lay a few yards away.

Unthinking Justice by Andras Millward

It seemed to the Black Consul as if a gateway to his darkest nightmares had opened up. A squad of Space Marines had materialised in the midst of the rebel force. Their archaic armour sported all manner of grisly and morbid decorations, borne of Chaos-twisted imaginations and depraved urges. Every suit of ancient armour bore the hateful many-headed Hydra symbol of the Alpha Legion.

Dark Heart by Jonathan Green

The wolves are running again. I can hear them panting in the darkness. I race through the forest, trying to outpace them. The trees seem to throw themselves in front of me to slow my progress as I crash on. Behind the wolves I sense another presence, something evil... I am in the place of blood again.

Last Chance by Gav Thorpe

'Name!' barks the young Lieutenant. I sway for a moment, hit by a sudden dizziness, and mumble it out. 'Kage.' Suddenly, I catch the distinctive scent of gun oil close by, hear the snick of a safety being released and feel a cold metal muzzle poking into the back of my neck. "Kage"? Your flash says "Hernandez", Guardsman. Just who are you, and what are you doing?

Also featuring...

Captain Helmsreich's definitive report on an Orc settlement, from Ralph Horsley; an aweomse cutaway through the 'Chimera' troop carrier, courtesy of Logan Lubera and Craig Yeung; still more 'Obvious Tactics' from David Pugh; and splendid illustrations from Simon Coleby, Simon Davis, Simon Harrison, John Hicklenton, Karl Kopinski and Jeff Waye.

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ISSN 1369-8648



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United Kingdom
Games Workshop Ltd,
Willow Road,
Lenton,
Nottingham
NG7 2WS

Australia
Games Workshop Ltd,
23 Liverpool Street,
Ingleburn
NSW 2565

USA
Games Workshop Inc,
6721 Baymeadow Drive,
Glen Burnie, Maryland
21060-6401

Canada
Games Workshop Ltd,
1645 Bonhill Road,
Units 9-11,
Mississauga,
Ontario
L5T 1R3



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PRODUCT CODE
60249999005

